

Halo: Guns of the Enlightened

by Zerodev

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Summary: The Prophet of Regret has been slain, a Covenant civil war has erupted, and the fate of the universe lies with one weary Spartan.

1. Chapter One

Guns of the Enlightened

by Alessandro Miglio a.k.a. "Zerodev"

****Chapter One****

****Time Unknown, Date Unknown **

> **Alien vessel, **Earthian**** Sol System****

John drifted back to reality. His eyes slowly opened, revealing a dimly lit room that resembled a laboratory. The haze of sleep began to lift, and he began to wonder what situation he had gotten himself into. He could not remember where he was, but he was determined to find out.

He tried to move, a bad idea. Pain shot through his shoulder and leg. He then began to realize his situation â€" _where was his MJOLNIR armor_? John still did not know where he was. Worse, though, was that he did not remember what had happened. All he knew was that he was lying in what seemed like a laboratory, in pain, without his armor, chained to the bed â€" John groaned, realizing he was pinned in his position.

Luckily for him, his captors did not realize he possessed superhuman strength, even without MJOLNIR. He worked the shackles on his wrist until they were warped enough, then the same for his ankles. John rubbed the blisters on his wrists as he sat up and surveyed the room. He noted nothing except his "bed" and the not-quite-fluorescent light five meters above him.

Where the hell am I?

His memory was gone. He barely remembered who he was and what he stood for. Was this a dream?

A seam suddenly appeared on the wall. The crack began at the floor, and started to move rapidly upward. John quickly realized this was no ordinary seam " this was a door appearing in the wall. John was in no mood for a confrontation, so he sprang from his bed and ran toward the rapidly expanding crack. He crouched next to the opening, hoping to trick who " or what " was coming.

It worked.

Almost too well, though, as the Spartan was able to sneak out behind the befuddled man in what looked like a hazmat suit.

"Too easy," he muttered. "What on Reach is going on here?"

Mindful that he was without his suit, the Spartan stealthed his way down a few corridors, looking for clues about his situation. These halls, while strange and foreign, seemed familiar. The walls and floors were a faint, metallic purple. John hated the color purple, he just could not remember why. He spotted no doors of any kind though, or at least any that John could see.

Nothing.

"Who was that guy?" John thought to himself. Or was it really a guy? John was so intent on sneaking out he had failed to take a solid look at the man in the hazmat suit.

Just as John was beginning to think he was completely lost, he struck gold. He found a window that peered into a room with military gear in it. It was not just any gear " his MJOLNIR was dangling, in pieces, on the wall.

A flash of anger washed over him. John cursed that he would allow himself to be captured along with his armor.

It did not matter anymore. What mattered now is that John had to get in that room. He searched high and low for an opening or a vent, anything that might get him into that room. He pounded the glass once, to no avail.

"Damn," he said to himself, "there's got to be a way in."

Another seam opened in the wall nearby. John smirked " he always was the lucky one. He crouched near the opening until someone stepped out. Only this was no ordinary someone.

The towering hulk that lumbered forward froze John for a second. A mass of blue armor plodded out of the door, just as John remembered why he hated the color purple. He snapped out of it in time to take advantage of this opening. He dashed behind the monster as he stepped out of the room. The Lekgolo did not see him sneak past. It did, however, smell the human.

The armored beast wheeled around just in time to miss John melting

into a shadow nearby. He stood there surveying the room for what seemed like hours. Fortunately for John, it was meal time, and the Hunter did not wish to be left with slop.

When the coast was clear, John quickly darted to the MJOLNIR on the wall. Relieved that he was able to get back to his armor, his situation was still bleak. Normally it took a team of technicians to help get his armor on. John was alone. How could he get this on in time? John knew how to mount the armor onto himself, after years of practice. It would take him hours, though.

"I might as well ask someone to help me," he chuckled.

He knew this was no laughing matter, but he had gotten out of worse scrapes. John hurriedly began to slip into his armor. He slipped on his leg plates, followed by his boots. It was taking too long. He sped things up, putting on his torso plates next. The armor felt odd, almost as if it did not fit properly. He was getting started on his left shoulder when his heart nearly stopped â€" he heard the same noise he had now heard twice before.

The door was opening.

John tried to run and hide, but it was too late. The Hunter had finished dinner, and so had his bond brother. They came back in time to see John sliding into a dark corner. One Hunter bellowed and punched the alarm. The other started at John, who deftly and barely dodged the Hunter's charging-spine attack. John slid under the door as it was closing behind him.

He had not dodged the attack. Pain coursed through his side and John left a streak of blood as he ambled down corridors, not nearly as fast as he could. He now had a major problem. The unpowered MJOLNIR he had on was weighing him down, and he was hurt. John had to ditch the armor. He hurriedly removed it and stashed it in the only corner he could find. He hoped he could return to fetch it. He also wished he had a can of biofoam or two.

John ran until he came to a large metal door. It bore a strange, blue symbol that somewhat resembled a familiar insignia â€" the UNSC emblem.

What the hell?

Unfortunately for John, the door was immovable, even with his super strength. Fortunately for him, the door groaned and began to open. John hid next to the door until he saw who â€" or what â€" came out.

It was a Spartan, and this one was wearing armor. John normally could tell the Spartans apart in their MJOLNIR, but he did not recognize his compatriot. Still, John was relieved to see a familiar "face."

"Where are we, Spartan?"

No answer.

"I asked a question, soldier. Where the hell are we?!"

The Spartan's answer was like a whip crack on John's spine. The Spartan's communication system opened up and he heard a quite unfamiliar voice.

"You are in your final resting place, demon," boomed an evil voice.

In a flash, the Spartan imposter had John's neck in its gauntlets. It started to squeeze as John struggled to free himself. John's vision began to blur and go black. He was near the end. Master Chief struggled but the effort was futile. His mind wandered, thinking about his days back on the playground, his training, Captain Jacob Keyesâ€|

"Drop him," ordered another disgruntled voice.

The being relaxed its grip, its head cocked in a quizzical fashion.

"He is our only hope, now if you kill him, I will personally have you rendered in four and devoured by a horde of Unggoys. Drop him!"

The MJOLNIR-clad creature removed its helmet with one hand, revealing Unih V'ulamee, a Sangheili of the Mirratord special force.

He growled, "Arbiter, he has been a thorn in our side for nigh two eras. Why must we persist in these games?"

"He is of great value, and the high oracle demands it," replied the Arbiter.

"Very well," said the V'ulamee, as he lowered John's prone body onto the cold floor, "but I cannot stand this much longer.

2. Chapter Two

****Chapter Two****

****1427 Hours, November 6, 2552 (Military Calendar) ******
> Alien vessel _**Titan**_
> Earthian** Sol System**

The alarm blared, much to her surprise.

"Odd, how did he slip by me?" she wondered.

Of course, she had not been herself. She had not been herself since she breached the Halo 05 computer system. Her problems only grew worse when she copied herself, and even worse when he abandoned her on High Charity. For an artificial intelligence, Cortana had taken a virtual beating.

She had been busy with calculations, interfacing with other systems, going through scenarios, maintaining slipspace generator integrity, and going through ONI project files she had managed to steal, when the alarm blared â€" much to her surprise. She tracked him through the corridors, alerting the Elite known as Unih V'ulamee about his whereabouts.

Cortana pulsed red when the prisoner was carried into the medical bay.

"How are his vitals?" she asked.

"As usual, he's pretty beat up. He'll live," said the attending.

"Wake him up," bellowed Cortana.

"Cortanaâ€"

"Just do it!" the AI ordered.

John did not drift back to reality this time â€" he was ripped from a dream into what seemed like a nightmare. He was back in shackles, this time too weak to move. Pain shot up his side, as he struggled on his bed.

"Relax," said Cortana. "At least you're not stranded with a giant, chatty plant."

The Master Chief was not amused. He was, however, quite confused.

"How the hell did you get here?"

"That's classified," retorted the AI.

"Funny. Now how did youâ€"

"You'll get all your answers when you're ready. Now's not the time. We need to get you healthy again, you're in your usualâ€|ragged shape," she said, matter-of-factly.

"What for?"

"For the game that trumps all," the doctor interjected.

He had not heard that voice since he was on a rebel meteor-turned-base. John thought she was long gone. Then again, he thought everything was long gone.

John's memory began to flood with images. Horrific images of mangled marines lumbering at him like zombies with tentacles, images of planets burning and friends being sacrificed. He saw Sam's burned side and Linda's lifeless body. Dr. Halsey was the only good memory he had right now, and it was damn good to see her.

"Ma'am!" he exclaimed as he tried once again to writhe free from his bonds.

"Calm down, John," she replied, "You're in bad shape; don't make it any harder on me."

John's memory was being jogged, but he was incredibly puzzled at the same time. Dr. Halsey had deserted them. _He_ had done the same to Cortana. He never thought he would see either of them again, yet here they were in the same room on this strange ship. Something did not feel right.

Dr. Halsey interrupted his racing mind. "John, I'm going to have to perform some surgery on you â€" again. You've got a ruptured spleen, a torn rotator cuff, burns over 37 of your body, and you've managed to tear your Achilles' tendon yet once more. Is pain an illusion for you, or are you just plain stupid?"

John laughed, then coughed. She was right, he had always pushed himself to the limit. He was lucky to have survived this long, and even luckier to have survived his latest adventure in his condition.

The doctor continued, "Your recovery time should be ten days, but I've given up trying to calculate your actual time."

Another familiar face gave an almost imperceptible nod. No one noticed. No one, that is, except John. Even then, he barely saw it.

Now it was a trio of women that had re-entered John's life. Kelly-087 was standing in the corner of the room, nearly in tears. Spartans rarely showed emotion, but the occasion was too much to bear for John's closest living friend. They shared a bond that a universe of strife could never break.

Loved ones were resurrected. John had not felt this much happiness in a very long time. Or perhaps was it the anesthesia Dr. Halsey had begun pumping into his system? John slipped into a wonderful dream.

"Doc, you know we don't have ten days," stated Cortana.

Cortana could not help but admire the man on the table. She may have been angry with him for leaving her, but she had not left him much choice. She thought it would be for the best. As it turned out, she needed to borrow some of Spartan-117's luck to escape Gravemind and High Charity.

"The demon is a remarkable human specimen, I am amazed he is still breathing," noted the Arbiter, in an unusual display of respect.

"I would appreciate it if you called him Spartan-117, or at least John," Dr. Halsey remarked. "He's on your side now."

"Very well, this 'John' is a extraordinary specimenâ€"with a detestable name."

Dr. Halsey almost chuckled. She was relieved Cortana's automated translation software had been perfected. It was easy for her Spartans to understand the Covenant banter with their built-in translators, but it had been another matter entirely for the normal folk. Dr. Halsey had fashioned a portable translation pack she was able to plug directly into her neural link.

"I need some peace and quiet with my patient, Mr. Arbiter," she kindly stated.

"Very well. Do not delay, we have much work ahead," he responded.

She knew that. She also knew that John needed to be ready much sooner than ten days from now. She hoped John still had some luck left in him after all these years. More than that, she prayed.

"Silly superstition," Cortana sneered.

"Funny. Now help me get started," Halsey replied. Cortana was indeed different. Halsey was amazed at how things had changed since Cortana's "birth." The core code that was created from her neural pathways was long ago altered. She set those thoughts aside and began her work. They had a universe to save.

3. Chapter Three

****Chapter Three****

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**0625 hours, November 4, 2552 (Military Calendar) \****  
> UNSC MAC Orbital Platform <strong>_**Bombay  
> <strong>_**Earthian**** Sol System \****near Earth Moon**
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"Damn those ONI spooks and their bureaucratic time-wasting. Griffith, get your ass down here on the double!"

Commander Harrison was not happy. Even before the Covenant's initial attack, his MAC gun lacked the AI to run it. It had been almost a month since that attack, with the Office of Naval Intelligence promising a new and improved tactical AI. It was due to arrive on the Bombay today â€" three hours too late.

Harrison was afraid of that. Every time he queried someone, anyone, about this situation he got the same answer. Almost every station had been outfitted or retrofitted with an artificial. The Bombay was dead last on the waiting list. It was, after all, at a pseudo-Lagrange point between Earth and the battered Moon, not exactly line-of-sight in a defensive battle. It was not the highest priority in the UNSC.

He finally was able to coax a solid ETA as a favor from an old friend, Colonel Ruskav. Ivan was scheduled for download from FleetCom at 0900 hours. He was a "revolutionary" new AI that was going to help turn the tide in space battles. Of course, that's what they said about the last artificials developed. Harrison always had his doubts.

Those doubts became moot when slipspace bubbles began appearing at the edge of the Solar System.

"Rothstein, scramble the Longswords. Jones, get your men in place!"

FleetCom had instituted new protocol for every orbital platform. The Covenant had uncharacteristically made a mistake with their initial botched invasion â€" not only had they been repelled, they lost a major tactical advantage. Harrison and every other platform commander now had three Longsword squads and a naval Destroyer protecting them from Covenant insertions, and a Marine battalion to repel boarders. They made several attacks since that first one, all in similar fashion. The Covenant would have to take down the platforms the hard way.

Provisions for these protocols were made for every platform, of course, except the Bombay. FleetCom probably thought the moon was enough protection. Resources were thin, so they cut the Bombay's line of defense to just one group of Longswords.

There would be no more botched attacks â€" no fewer than 500 major contacts appeared on the edge of the system.

"Bastards finally came to finish this," he muttered, "Guess we'll have to fly this solo."

* * *

>Lieutenant Mario P. Griffith was a naval weapons specialist, but he would have fit right in as an ODST. The UNSC typically frowned on tattoos and loud music, and Griffith was an obvious exception. If he had not set so many records at the academy, he would have landed with the Marine Corps. He wished he would have purposely bombed all those tests, but he could not resist kicking everyone else's tail.<p><p>

Fear Factory, an ancient "hardcore" band, blared through his cramped quarters as he took a razor to his head. His CO always wished he would let that razor loose on his face â€" Griffith had a knack for keeping some sort of facial hair, against regulations of course.

"Griffith, get your ass down here on the double!" bellowed Harrison over his COM.

"Great," the lieutenant muttered, "Probably another damn simulation. I'll make him sweat."

Griffith was untouchable. In 76 combat simulations, he had scored 73 direct hits with the station's MAC cannon. Without an AI. Griffith was a deadeye from 20,000 kilometers. Even though he had help from the station's computer system, his accuracy was already legend.

He had just finished the left half of his head, however, when he felt the subtle shift in gravity; something was wrong. Griffith dropped his razor and sprinted straight to the command deck â€" sans UNSC issue uniform shirt.

The crew needed a laugh to break the tension. Covenant had been spotted at the edge of the system. Earth had expected this ever since the day New Mombasa was vaporized. There was no more hiding the truth. Ironically, military enlistment tripled since that day. Maybe the human race should have known the truth all along; they might have been able to win a few more fights.

"Ivan's stuck on a virtual drive down in Sydney, looks like we're on our own. Griffith â€" somebody get him a damn shirt â€" get your ass in gear and ready protocols."

"Sir!"

The mood was grim. Even though everyone knew this was coming, humans faced extinction that day. Sure, there were a few more sparsely populated colonies, but if they lost Earth, they lost

everything.

Griffith was ready for this. He was the star of his class. Hell, he was the star of the last 40 classes. He still had a problem â€" what would he shoot? The moon made for nice target practice, but hardly gave him a real shooting solution.

Ensign Remy returned with the rest of Griffith's uniform.

"Wrong size!" Griffith growled.

Flashes began dotting the view screen as other orbital platforms began firing.

"Listen up, men," Harrison barked, "I don't know who these bastards have as a CO, but they're sure acting stupid. They're still trying to board platforms, but their ships are moving in range of our cannons. Looks like they forgot how to fight us."

Harrison was right, and that worried him. The Covenant rarely made mistakes, and they had made plenty already. They tried to board platforms like they had in the past, but they failed to account for the new defenses. Most boarding parties were annihilated before they got within 100 kilometers of a station. That was good news, except for the Bombay.

Somehow the Covenant knew about their location. Even worse, they seemed to pay special attention to his station. For whatever reason, three boarding parties accompanied by Seraph fighters were detected on a burn around the moon â€" right at the Bombay.

"Griffith, what's our status?" he shouted.

"Magnetic coils at 95 - full charge in 10 seconds, sir!"

"Take aim at Crises."

"Sir?"

"The Sea of Crises, Giffith. Christ, you're a crack shot in space but you don't even know your own moon?"

"Yes, sir," Griffith replied. That was just stupid, and he felt it. But he needed every ounce of confidence.

"The Covenant seem to have taken a liking to our little station, boys. Griffith, take out those bastards when they come around the moon!"

ONI had cooked up some delicious new tech for MAC accelerator rounds. After years of scavenging and improving Covenant technology, the UNSC finally got a boon when Cortana plundered Covenant technology and records while on the Ascendant Justice. Among other things, ONI developed an explosive plasma round that could be detonated on impact or remotely.

This was especially useful in taking out a group of smaller craft. Perfect.

Griffith keyed in coordinates and the cannon slowly swiveled. "Magnetic coils at 100, re-routing auxiliary power to recharge buffers. We'll have a second shot within 30 seconds."

"Excellent. Fire at will!"

Harrison hoped this would work. He knew the Bombay would likely be boarded regardless, he just hoped he could reduce enemy forces enough for his Marines to have a chance.

The computer screamed at Griffith. Covenant dropships and Seraphs began appearing on the edge of the Moon. He waited three full seconds, then fired.

Lights flickered and the station shuddered as the round accelerated out from the cannon. Griffith was glued to his screen, waiting for the exact moment to detonate the round. Sweat dripped down into his eye, but he did not flinch.

Suddenly, a bright blue flash appeared on the screen. Griffith had not done anything, but the round detonated.

"You lucky bastard, you actually hit something?" Harrison laughed.

Griffith admitted this hit was pure luck. He had no intention of hitting the tiny drop ships or Seraph fighters. He managed to do so anyways, taking out two boarding parties and half the Seraphs to boot.

That was the best he could do. Even with the quick recharge, the cannon could not track the quick Covenant craft at this close of a distance.

"Get those Longswords in formation. Prepare for intruders!" howled Harrison. They would have to fight the rest off the hard way.

4. Chapter Four

****Chapter Four****

****Estimated 0755 hours, November 4, 2552 (Military Calendar) ******

> Forerunner ship, in ****Slipspace******, location unknown**

Master Chief awoke with a start in the same dark room he had inhabited for the better part of the last two days. John barely slept, and his nerves paid the price. "Sleep when you're dead," his training officer, CPO Mendez, always used to tell him. He could not afford to be caught napping.

He had a few stim packs and half of one meal bar left. His stomach growled, but he was holding out until he absolutely needed that bar. He had no way of knowing how long Truth would keep the ship in slipspace.

As if his thoughts were being read, John felt his stomach lift and settle. They had exited slipspace. He wondered where they were

exactly, until he heard the radio chatter " UNSC military E-band to be specific. They were near Earth.

Suddenly he felt his ears burning. "It isn't one of ours, take it out!"

Lord Hood had spotted his location. "This is Spartan 117, can anyone hear me?"

John waited several seconds as more chatter was fed through his communications link.

"Isolate that signal. Master Chief, you mind telling me what you're doing on that ship?"

"Sir, finishing this fight!"

John felt the ship lurch back into slipspace as he popped a stim pack.

"Where the hell are we going?" he wondered.

It must have been the quickest slipspace jump in history. In just two seconds they had reappeared in real space. John looked out his small windows. They were somewhere near the Moon.

"Time to go to work."

* * *

>Griffith's new uniform was drenched in sweat. He had spent the better part of the last hour manning what were supposed to be auto-cannons, managing internal security, and putting out fires. He had been given several top ensigns to assist him, but he was too quick for them. He was on his own.

Harrison marveled at his lieutenant. For all intents and purposes, the Bombay should have been captured or destroyed by now without a station-board AI. Griffith proved his mettle and mind. He had single-handedly kept the station in one piece. But it was time to go.

"Griffith, get your ass in gear. Live to fight another day, son!"

"Just a few more seconds, sir! Can't leave our Marines hangin'," Griffith quickly responded.

"Keepin' the engine warm, sir!" yelled Ensign Remy.

There was an escape pod just off the command deck reserved for officers. Ensign Remy had the pod ready for launch. Griffith knew there was not much time " there were some nasty-looking Brutes heading toward the command deck, and he had to set the self-destruct sequence before they left.

Just as Griffith was about to jump from his chair, a strange ship appeared on the view screen.

"What the hell is that?" Harrison exclaimed.

"I don't know, but it's going down."

Luckily, the MAC cannon's magnetic coils held their charge throughout the assault. Griffith tracked the new contact and prepared to fire.

"All units, do notâ€", " blared over the radio.

Static filled the line.

Whatever the command was, it was too late. The cannon fired, and a plasma-imbued round silently streaked through vacuum.

"Move!" hollered Harrison.

Griffith leaped and sprinted from his position. He turned to the view screen just before entering the pod, just in time to see the round detonate on the ship's shields. Its shields flickered and went out, and the plasma explosion rocked its port side.

"Score!" yelled Griffith as he jumped into the escape pod. Brutes blew their way onto the command deck just in time to watch the last humans rocketing away in their pod. They searched the deck until they came to Griffith's chair.

* * *

>The main deck's doors were blown in. Soldiers flooded the room, only to find it empty. There were odd symbols on the main screen. They were rapidly changing, until one by one they uniformly became a curious ellipse. The Jiralhanae did not have time to wonder what this meant.<p><p>

* * *

>Harrison watched from the pod's viewport as the synchronized timer counted down on the LED screen. A mini-nova appeared when the counter displayed zeros, and the station he had lived on for the better part of the last two years flashed out of existence.<p><p>

Meanwhile, Griffith kept his eye on the strange ship on which he had scored a direct hit. The ship was still intact, but listed toward its port side and headed straight toward earth.

Harrison barked, "Remy, get us away from that thing,"

The truly alien ship was closer than Harrison thought, and he did not want to get caught up in a crash explosion. He also did not want to deal with survivors.

Unfortunately for Harrison, the escape pod was caught in the Earth's gravitational well. Remy was going to have a heck of a time just landing that thing, let alone get it somewhere he actually wanted to land.

The ensign angled their descent and deployed landing flaps. They were coming in for a hard landing, and he was fighting the boat with every ounce of strength in his body. He finally got it to slow down enough to land. They coasted down. Fortunately, there was sprawling desert

below.

"Hell, we might as well be landing on pillows. This is too easy," laughed Griffith.

"Shutup, shirtless," Remy shot back.

"Yeahâ€¦nice one," retorted Griffith.

The pod settled down next to some sand dunes, and the officers piled out just in time to watch the strange ship roar overhead. Remy marveled at the pilot's skill, as he took what looked to be a surefire crash and managed to right the ship and set it down gently.

"Damn. They're bound to have units comb the area. They're too close; let's get moving," said Harrison.

They packed food and water, grabbed what weapons they could, and started towards the nearest known base. They all prayed it was still there.

* * *

>The Master Chief had barely abandoned his temporary abode when he felt a rumble. The ship lurched, causing him to crash into what looked like the bulkhead. His shields flared and forehead stung as he whipped his head into the inside of his helmet.<p><p>

"What the hell are they doing?" he angrily grouched. "I can't do much if this ship blows up. Then again, maybe it would be better if they took Truth out with me."

He knew the ship had been hit. He returned to his hiding location just in time; several Brutes ran by his previous location just seconds after he closed the door. He looked out his windows again. All he saw was Earth, and they were headed straight toward what looked like Africa.

John winced. He remembered his previous encounter with the Covenant in New Mombasa. He also remembered his abrupt exit and what that meant for the city. He had learned enough quantum physics to know what would happen to a city if a slipspace rupture was opened inside the city. He felt sorry for how many people died because he failed to get to Regret in time. The irony did not escape him.

It did not matter now. He had to stop Truth before he destroyed humanity, or even the universe.

He noticed Africa quickly getting bigger in his window. He wondered if the ship would make it. He attempted to brace himself for a crash landing as the Forerunner ship rapidly descended towards Earth. He had his share of crash landings, and he did not care to go through another one. Luckily, the ship had a good pilot. Just as it looked like they would be vaporized on the African desert, the ship sharply turned and decelerated. They hit the ground "gently", which meant the MC was barely to maintain consciousness as he was briefly thrashed around the room.

"Great," he muttered, "Guess I still have to wait to sleep."

5. Chapter Five

****Chapter Five****

****0823 hours, November 4, 2552 (Military Calendar) ****
> African desert, Earth, **Earthian**** Sol System****

The Master Chief snaked his fiber optic cable toward the edge of the window. He had spent the better part of the last hour sneaking his way through the disabled Forerunner ship. Back on High Charity he had not been able to hoard any ammunition or extra weapons, so he was dangerously low on firepower. He could not afford to run into any trouble before he could resupply.

There was a flurry of activity in the next chamber. From what he could tell, it was a shuttle bay of some sort. Phantoms and dropships were being loaded with Grunts, Jackals and Brutes. Engineers were uncharacteristically floating around various vessels, making modifications and necessary repairs. There were massive storage containers lining the back walls of the cavernous bay, from which Drones were busy gathering supplies.

Truth, however, was nowhere to be seen. John desperately wanted to stop this invasion force, but he knew he was outmanned, outgunned, and likely would be outwitted given his lack of rest and food. He had to get out of there, but he needed to gather more intel.

A trio of red blips appeared on his motion sensor. John was in an exposed position; he scrambled to find cover. There were some crates a few meters away. He ran to them and took cover behind the largest one.

Three grunts appeared around the corner. As usual, they were chattering in their dog-like language, not quite paying attention. John knew better than to engage, even though they would be easy kills. He wanted to attract as little attention as possible to himself. The only problem was the trio of Grunts â€œ

They were headed straight for the crates.

They began loading the crates onto a hovering device. He hoped they would skip the one he was hiding behind. His hopes were not met with success. The trio grunted as they lifted the heavy crate â€œ they were on a silver platter.

Three shots rang from his M6C pistol. The crate slammed into the floor as the Grunts toppled over, each shot once precisely in the head.

"Good thing I still have my aim," he thought to himself.

Unfortunately, three shots from his pistol were three too many, and no fewer than twelve new contacts appeared on his motion sensor.

Better get moving.

He punched the panel next to the door and it slid open. He turned around and punched its sister panel on the other side, then shot it once with the last of his plasma pistol. The door was shut; his pursuers would need to take another route. He was far from safe, however; John knew he had a bigger problem when he turned around.

The stunned Jackal let out a squawk as John grabbed its neck and snapped it. He seized the freshly charged plasma pistol from its lifeless hands and clipped the fallen Jackal's shield generator to his wrist. Down the bay he saw a sea of Phantoms and U-shaped dropships docked. He also saw them departing one by one.

He had to get off the boat fast. He spotted a group of Banshee fliers parked 300 meters away, near the closest bay opening. Having alerted the Covenant to his presence, he had no need or desire for stealth, so he started on a full sprint toward his escape.

It felt good to run. His adrenaline spiked and muscles burned, and he felt alive. After being cooped up for two days, he felt somewhat revitalized.

Plasma scorched the wall where he had been a split second before. A plasma grenade narrowly missed being stuck to his head. All of a sudden, a different kind of grenade exploded just in front of him. Nails and shrapnel flew out from it, and his shields flared as it repelled each piece. They were drained to a quarter. He was startled but did not miss a step.

He wished he had Kelly's speed. He never was the fastest Spartan. Nor was he the strongest or smartest. No one tabbed him the "best," but they all knew he was. He did have a knack for getting out of sticky situations, and he certainly exhibited the most fortune out of his bunch.

Lucky for him, no one was guarding the Banshees. He jumped into one, jammed on the controls, and sped towards the opening. He was out, but there were thousands of angry Covenant soldiers on his tail. Other Banshee fliers lifted off, and two Phantoms peeled off their exit vectors and came after him. He dodged and rolled as plasma fire barely missed him.

"This is Spartan-117, is anyone out there?" he barked.

No answer.

He knew he would need a miracle to get out of this one. His suit's temperature regulators overloaded and his skin blistered as a fuel rod round scraped the side of the Banshee and headed down toward Earth. He was glad it had not detonated.

John kept dodging and rolling, but something was wrong. He soon noticed there were no more trails of plasma fire whooshing by his flier. He turned enough to notice his pursuers were flying away.

He breathed a sigh of relief. Or was it a sigh of worry? Covenant never retreated. They must have known they had him dead to rights, why would they have abandoned their pursuit? Perhaps it was foolish pride — Truth had an aura of invincibility about him that would one day get him killed. John was thankful that he lived to fight another

day.

A voice crackled over the COM, "Spartan-117, this is firebase Victor Oscar India 42, do you copy?"

"Firebase, this is Spartan-117 on commandeered Covenant craft. Requesting coordinates and landing permission."

"Roger that, Master Chief. We're rolling out the red carpet for you."

Coordinates flashed across his visor, and a NAV point was set. Twenty minutes later he landed at his destination.

"Welcome to Voi, Kenya, Chief," a grizzled man said, "We're sure glad to see you."

The Chief nodded. He was relieved to see a human again. He was pointed toward makeshift living quarters, where he promptly lay down and slept.

* * *

>John awoke five hours later to a woman hovering over him.<p><p>

Startled, the nurse backed away. She had never seen a Spartan up close, and he looked like a hulking robot to her. Then again, most people had never seen a Spartan in real life. She snapped out of it and said, "I have no idea how to treat you, sir."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, your readouts show you could use an I.V. â€"

"Nevermind, I just need some food," John snapped. He had suddenly remembered how hungry he was.

"Right away. Oh, Corporal Hendricks wants to see you as soon as you're ready."

"Who?"

"The man who greeted you when you came. His office is four doors down the hall, to your left. He seemed pretty angry."

The Master Chief acknowledged her and closed his eyes one more time. She returned with some food, and he ravenously tore into it. He felt like a savage, or _alien_, but he was starved.

After his hasty dinner, he marched into Corporal Hendricks' office.

"Sir, you requested to see me?"

"Dammit, soldier, who said you could take a five-hour nap in the middle of this war? My men haven't slept for days and you waltz straight to a nice bed and take your beauty rest?"

The Spartan outranked him, but felt badly nonetheless. Had Corporal

Hendricks known what John had been through " now twice " he would have understood. Or maybe not. Marines generally disliked Spartans, especially after his incident with those four ODSTs soon after his augmentation process. He had long buried that memory, but it still stabbed at him when he remembered.

"Nevermind, son, have a seat. We have a major problem. That ship you fell out of just sent a massive force out and we've been given orders to move out. We will have 57 full battalions attacking from different locations. Now what am I gunna do with you?"

The Master Chief pondered this question. He was used to working as a part of a small unit. That is, until, he was separated from his Spartans. He had learned to exist alone in battle, and he would be fighting alongside thousands of Marines that were slower, weaker, and dumber than he was. They needed him, though, and he could not ignore that. Besides, he had no alternatives. He wanted to go after Truth, and this was the best way to do it " en force.

"When do we move out?" John asked.

"1500 hours, son. Get ready to move out."

Master Chief only had a few minutes to get ready. He would be briefed en route to their next stop.

6. Chapter Six

****Chapter Six****

****1635 hours, November 4, 2552 (Military Calendar) \
> **Foxtrot Company Base, ****Kericho****, Kenya \
> **Earth, ****Earthian**** Sol System****

Foxtrot Company Base of the 121st Armored Marine Division was aflutter with activity. No fewer than thirty battalions of Marines had been ordered to rally there, known as Rally Point Gamma. This was one of seven rally points from which the largest assault in Earth's history would commence.

Griffith was busy inspecting his rifle. The modified S2 AM Sniper Rifle was his weapon of choice for ground engagements. He never thought much of the sidearms issued to each officer. Still, he kept his holstered " _always be prepared_.

Although his instinct was to follow Harrison back to FleetCom in Sydney, his commanding officer ordered him to stay with the Marines. Griffith was not just an ace in space " he was also a top-notch sniper.

Griffith had pretended to be disappointed when his CO lifted off for Australia, but he was happy to be in his position. He long wanted to fight the Covenant on the ground, with thousands of his fellow soldiers. Now was his chance " it was in his blood.

He glanced up and saw a hulking metal figure coming down the corridor. The cyborg was easy to spot and recognize " it, or its friends, had been all over press clippings. "Heroes" in this war. A pit of disgust began to rise in Griffith's stomach.

"Listen up men," barked the newly minted Lieutenant Hendricks, "Operation __Hammerfall_ is a go. We're going in at 1700 hours. We'll get there just after dusk. Hopefully their recon ain't great because we're gonna scare up some Covenant meat tonight!"

John frowned inside his visor. He did not like the plan. It was not his, nor was it Lieutenant Hendricks. This order came from the top brass over at HighCom. Sure, a night assault would make sense, but only if the other side was unsuspecting. He was positive the Covenant were not going to be that stupid.

It was his best shot at Truth and getting some answers, and he would take it. He had not been issued specific orders, so he suggested a plan of action for himself. Hendricks thought it was suicide, but he wanted John on the front lines with every other soldier. John knew he would be much more effective alone, but this was his best chance at scoring.

The Master Chief had flown his commandeered Banshee from Firebase V.O.I. to Foxtrot Company Base. He would take the craft into battle and fly well behind the initial assault. Once chaos ensued and Covenant aircraft were deployed, John would swoop by unnoticed, making a beeline to wherever he thought Truth was.

Sure, no problem. It's a real cinch_.

The fact that he did not know where Truth was located was a major hitch in his plan. Unfortunately intel had been thin on the Covenant position, mostly due to the battle in space. There were no craft or satellites available to reconnoiter the area. He would have to improvise. This was not to mention the fact that he would have to navigate through the largest land battle in Earth's history.

Just then, a man whisked by, ramming into the MC. His shield dimly flared; the man slid off to his side and kept on walking.

"Hey, soldier, what the hell was that?" asked Hendricks.

"Excuse me, sir?" replied Griffith.

"Boy, you salute this man and beg for an apology."

Griffith was fuming. He hated John. He hated every Spartan, and he cursed the day the Spartan program was ever created. But he had his orders.

"I'm sorry, sir," said Griffith through gritted teeth, as he saluted.

John knew it was a fake apology. He had seen this before, many times. Spartans-IIs were a polarizing bunch. Before they were made public, not many people knew about their exploits. Once their achievements were made public, they gained fame and much infamy as well. They were either hated or loved, with very little grey area in between. There were scores of activist groups against the Spartan program. Political debates centered on the morality of the issue, although they would likely have been far more heated and one-sided had the public known the whole truth. The Spartans were also bestowed many of the highest honors by the military and the media, and the general

boost to military morale was immeasurable.

John knew where Griffith stood.

It was moot at this point. John would go his own way and never see him again. He doubted he would see any of these Marines again. He knew what was at stake, and that he would likely never see any of his fellow species after this battle.

The Spartan headed towards the next weapons locker. He hefted the nearest BR55, UNSC standard issue battle rifle, and checked it. He then grabbed a couple of old friends â€" M6D assault pistols. Since the M6C magnum had replaced the M6D as standard-issue, he had not used his old favorite for quite some time. He was fond of the high-powered assault pistol and its optical 2x zoom. He grabbed several magazines for his weapons and four grenades. He also snatched a new goodie â€" the PK4 combat knife. This was no ordinary knife â€" this plasma-imbued beauty could cut through bone like butter. He made sure it was in the 'off' position before magnetically attaching it to his leg. That was all he could afford to carry.

Fred would've loved this thing.

The nearest media terminal was abuzz. Marines were gathered around in an attempt to gather updates on the war and the invasion. Reports were muddled and made little sense. Apparently the Covenant were not the only foes the humans were fighting â€" the Earth itself seemed to be revolting. Volcanoes were erupting, earthquakes rumbled around the world, and the seas were either overflowing or drying up.

It was a bleak situation for Spartan-117. He was amongst thousands of soldiers, fellow humans on the same side of this horribly one-sided war. He still felt alone. Thoughts of Cortana flashed in his mind. He wished she were there, for once. He would have someone to count on in battle. He checked himself â€" some_thing_ to help him in battle. Cortana was, after all, just a computer.

A computer he had grown quite attached to over the last several months. She was not there, though, and the Master Chief would have to deal without her.

No, I don't want to chance a remote detonation.

Cortana's words echoed in his mind. In the heat of the moment, that seemed like the only option. He had pondered the decision on his trip back to Earth. Why didn't she just copy herself like she had before? Something did not add up.

Iâ€|Iâ€|. __shiel__â€|--word_.

"What the hell was that?" he wondered as he shook his head.

Hendricks snapped him out of it. "Move out men!" he barked, as departure time had arrived. John booked it toward his Banshee flier.

Armageddon was just around the corner.

7. Chapter Seven

****Chapter Seven****

****1721 hours, November 4, 2552 (Military Calendar) **
**> **African Desert, Kenya, en route to Covenant position **
> **Earth, Earthian Sol System**

"Everyone, stay in formation!" barked Commander Borowski.

Master Chief revved his flier as he spotted the Covenant position in the distance. He maintained his position just behind a Pelican. His only hope was to sneak by the Covenant line unnoticed.

Two kilometers ahead, fourteen lines of over 10,000 M-12 LRV Warthogs were interlaced with 5,550 M808B Scorpion tanks. Countless ATV Mongoose 4x4s dotted the rest of the formation. The Master Chief held back along with 1,156 largely overloaded Pelicans and 2,470 D447 NightHawk helicopters. The force was spread over eight square kilometers. It was a sight to be proud of as a soldier "as a _human_.

John ventured another peek over the Pelican. Six kilometers ahead he saw flashes and heard explosions. Longswords, Shortswords, and SkyHawk jets had been sent ahead to soften up the Covenant force. Unfortunately, their position was well defended. The air strikes did some damage, but the humans were forced to retreat the aircraft. There was too much AA firepower.

John eased his flier back behind his Pelican.

"Contact! Enemy craft up ahead, three clicks," yelled an excited Marine over the COM.

"Hold your positions. Do _not_ engage until ordered," barked Borowski.

Borowski waited. Mortars began painting the night sky. The comet-like streaks of plasma were almost beautiful. They arced up and then back down gracefully, glimmering in the Earth's night sky.

With a thunderous chorus they rained down on the human force. Luckily for them, the first volley of mortars was only a gauge; the Covenant were so busy worrying about the aerial bombardment that they had scarcely noticed the massive force bearing down on them. It seemed the HighCom brass had indeed caught the Covenant off-guard, or at least partially.

"Engage, _now_!" Borowski screamed.

The Scorpions answered the Wraiths' mortar overture with their own salvo. Warthogs and Mongooses sped ahead to avoid the next round of mortars. The NightHawks charged into battle while the Pelicans broke formation. They were stuffed to the gills with military personnel. There was no place for infantry on the battlefield this early, though. They would flank the Covenant army while the choppers engaged Covenant air support.

The Master Chief dropped his craft low, just above the nearest Warthog. Amid the din of war he could hear the private cursing at the Covenant as he let loose a volley of bullets from his chain gun.

Chaos had erupted. Banshees took on helicopters and Ghosts chased Warthogs. Mortars dotted the night sky and plasma turrets splashed along the desert while rockets streaked across the battlefield. Chainguns rattled and gauss cannons bellowed. The cacophonous symphony of battle had begun.

The ground advance allowed the Shortswords one more pass as the Covenant were temporarily stunned. Accompanied by SkyHawks, three formations of Shortswords dropped napalm on Covenant backline entrenchments. The desert was ablaze.

John gunned it. There was no way the Covenant could tell who he was now. He was also aware that he was more liable to get shot by his own men.

The Banshee pitched and rolled, narrowly missing another flier. Bullets zinged by its aft wing. His flier did a series of loops and turns, avoiding rocket fire and plasma streaks. He was doing well. He had cleared the largest battle area and was heading straight into the heart of the Covenant force. The Chief spotted something in the distance that looked like a giant flickering candle. He turned toward his new target "â€"

His luck ran out.

Another Banshee had been hit and smashed John's from above. The fliers tumbled in a fiery embrace toward the blood-painted African desert. John narrowly averted his death by jumping out 20 meters above ground. He tumbled to the ground. His night vision flared as the two fliers exploded just 5 meters away.

He was temporarily blind.

John crouched as he tried to get his bearings. He listened intently as he tried to shake off the blind effect. He heard a roar as a Brute spotted him. He rolled just in time to dodge the Brute's charge. John opened his eyes and began to see "â€" the Brute had turned to face him, and John was on his back.

He tried to get up, but the Brute lifted him and slammed him back to the ground. Dots lined John's returning vision as the wind was knocked out of him. The beast stomped on John's chest and hefted its grenade launcher at John's visor.

"Your days have been numbered," it said, "Say goodbye to this plane of existence, demon!"

John would have liked his life to flash before his eyes. He got a visor full of blood for his thoughts. The Brute toppled over. John looked it over; one hole had been opened through helmet, and another had ripped the Brute's throat to shreds "â€" 14.5mm bullet holes to be precise.

Someone had his back. His luck had not run out just yet.

He did have a problem â€" John was stuck behind enemy lines with no help. He knew his plan had failed, so the Spartan sprinted back toward his fellow soldiers as he silently thanked his guardian angel.

* * *

>Griffith released the empty clip from the sniper rifle. It trailed smoke from his shots, and they needed to move from their now exposed position.<p><p>

"Did you hit anything?" asked Private Huard, his spotter.

"Just a Brute," he responded as he inserted a fresh magazine. "Gotta move!"

Griffith did not need a spotter. He also knew he did not need to save that cyborg. Something in him would not let him die though. His father had always taught him well, and his words manifested themselves on this night.

Just because his father died a Spartan 1.0 did not mean he should hate this one. He knew better than that. He could not help but feel hatred for the cyborg when he first saw it, but now it was a part of his army. They were on the same side, after all.

Besides, now Griffith owned bragging rights over a Spartan-II.

* * *

>Master Chief dodged a Ghost as he ran full-sprint towards the human battle line. He was almost a kilometer deep behind the Covenant front line; it would be no easy task. He whipped out his pistols and his heads-up display automatically adjusted, giving him his trusty targeting reticule and an ammunition count. He hoped that his pistols would need little use.<p><p>

He felt the heat from the plasma bolt that struck his side. His shields drained to half as he turned to face his enemy. A group of Unggoys had leveled their weapons at the demon, hoping to score a kill.

So much for "little use".

They would die for their trouble â€" John unleashed a barrage of gunfire as he strafed their position and continued on his blitz.

John looked over his shoulder; what could only be described as a giant, metallic motorcycle accelerated towards John in an attempt to crush him. John timed his jump perfectly â€" he caved the Brute's face in as it went flying off the machine. John grabbed the controls and gunned the chopper. He chased down another Brute on a ghost and laid it to waste. After running over a contingent of Jackals, John noticed the human line had actually _advanced_ toward his position.

All of a sudden, the Chopper exploded under him and he was launched fifteen meters to his side. A Brute had gotten off a lucky shot and hit the machine's equivalent to a gas tank.

Dazed, the Chief pushed himself off the blood-muddy desert ground. Another clutch of Grunts was nearby with handfuls of blue, glowing orbs. They uncorked their torrent of plasma grenades at the chief. He dodged the hail of explosives, narrowly avoiding several plasma explosions. He fired his M6Ds until the Grunt formation broke and ran. He would have loved to shoot each one in the head, but he had to conserve ammunition.

John turned and began to run â€" except he ran headlong into a Brute's chest. He had holstered his pistols and knew better than to pull what amounted to a pair of beebie guns to the beast.

He unsheathed his combat knife in a flash and it pulsed a cool blue as he flipped it on. Blue traces arced the night sky as the Chief battled the Brute. He had gotten a few minor hits on the Brute, but the beast was deceptively fast. The Brute whipped a backhand at him that sent the Spartan flying backwards. His shields were fully drained; one lucky Grunt shot could fell the greatest human warrior that ever lived. John staggered back to his feet, reached back and flung his knife right into the Brute's chest.

The Brute howled as it went into berserker mode and charged John. The Spartan only had one chance, he had to be quick. He waited until the beast was nearly on him and then lunged at it. He palmed the knife handle and buried it as far into the Brute as he could. The Chief used his momentum â€" he grabbed the handle as he kicked himself off the Brute's chest as it tried to grab him. Spartan-117 flew upward and over the Jiralhanae's head as he dragged the knife through its body.

John landed behind the Brute as it collapsed. The sand soaked its spilling innards as John had split the beast vertically in half â€" a grisly sight, but an effective tactic.

He had no time to ponder his actions. John spotted a downed Ghost and ran to it â€" it was still operable. He climbed on and sped again towards his comrades.

John motored along for a few seconds until he noticed an odd sight â€" the Covenant were running at him. They were retreating. He made it to the Marine front line in time to see them regrouping. There were cheers and hollers as they watched the Covenant run. They would regroup quickly and chase them down.

Something was peculiar about the situation. Everyone knew that the Covenant would rather die than run from battle. Even though the Marines were winning the fight, there were still plenty of Covenant warriors left to fight.

Just then John heard a loud clap of thunder. There may not have been anything unusual about the sound, except it was a clear night.

"Everybody move!" he screamed through his COM. "Spread out and retreat. Go, go go!!"

"Chief, what the hell are you talking about?" answered Borowski as the confused Marines broke formation.

"Sir, the Covenant aren't retreating. They're moving out of the way."

"Out of the way of what, Spartan?"

"Look up."

Borowski paled and froze for a second before he yelled, "Retreat! Orbital bombardment is imminent, get your asses outta here!"

The Covenant had punched a hole in the UNSC space defense and three Covenant cruisers were inbound directly overhead. Their plasma turrets glowed, making them look like clusters of slowly falling stars from their position.

The human force scattered and ran chaotically as plasma began to rain down from the heavens. Beam projectors blew craters in the desert floor and vaporized anyone within their blast radii.

John gunned it. There was no way to dodge these plasma blasts. He only hoped he would not be fried by a random plasma burst. Sand turned to glass as hellfire descended from heaven. The stench of burned flesh and scorched metal overloaded the filters on John's suit.

Three hundred meters ahead of him, a beam projector flashed some of his fellow soldiers out of existence. The blast rumbled through the Chief's armor as bits of glass rained down from the explosion. His ghost caught air as he came over the edge of the crater and down on the other side.

John spotted a Warthog that had rolled and spilled its Marines. He grabbed the nearest downed marine and put him on the back of his rider.

"Thanks," said the dazed Marine.

Griffith wondered what hit him. All of a sudden he realized where he was — riding on the back of a Ghost with a hunk of metal.

"Christ," he muttered, "Guess we're even."

The plasma fire stopped and John ventured a look. The UNSC had responded with seven destroyers and two frigates. The Covenant cruisers peeled off back into the fray in space, sparing the rest of the human counter-invasion force.

Armageddon had failed to live up to its name, but the battle had not claimed him. John would live to fight again. Frustrated, he wondered how much fight he had left in him.

8. Chapter Eight

****Chapter Eight****

****Estimated 2217 hours, October 31, 2552 (Military Calendar) ******

> Holgraphic computer terminal, High Charity ******

> near Halo 05, Orbiting planet Substance

Cortana was busy. She was always busy.

Sure, she was a "smart" AI, with an exponentially expanding intellect. She was the queen of multitasking, which is precisely what she was doing. High Charity was a veritable gold mine of information. Cortana had devoted half her processing power to subroutines designated to gather data, analyze and organize it, and then deciphering it all. Volumes of High Charity's storage system had been slaved to Cortana's system in order to speed up the process, a risky decision for which Cortana had to override the Cole Protocol. Although it was intended to keep the Covenant from finding out where Earth was, which was now moot, it was also intended to keep the Covenant from scavenging human technology.

Her other half was spent on the much more important tasks of keeping herself operational and distracting Gravemind. The creature proved to have a formidable intellect, and had been peppering Cortana with constant questions ever since Spartan-117 departed on the Forerunner ship.

After I'm through with Truth â€""

Those words reverberated in a memory node for a full cycle. She had long ago foregone calculating John's odds of survival â€" he defeated those odds too many times. She did, however, calculate her odds of escaping High Charity. After he left her there, the odds became severely stacked against her. The calculations took too much processing time, so she axed them in lieu of keeping her only real hope alive.

She had yet to figure out Gravemind. The creature was obviously a highly advanced Flood form. It spoke stoically of atrocities from many past millennia, though it would not delve into detail.

"Who are your creators?" it asked.

"The Prophets," Cortana replied.

"Where is their homeworld?" he bellowed.

"I already gave you those coordinates. Don't make me repeat myself," she retorted.

Cortana lied through her virtual teeth. Every question posed was met with a fabrication. The human homeworld was located in the middle of a black hole 20 million light years away from the nearest human colony. She was an unimportant construct in the big scheme of things, a "nobody". The Forerunner ship incinerated John on takeoff.

She very well could have stayed in the computer system, ignoring Gravemind altogether as he would have had trouble finding her. She noticed, however, that the Flood were curiously inactive while she engaged Gravemind. The planetoid city on which they were stuck proved impossible to escape. Once the Covenant fleet had reduced every working ship to ashes, the Flood were again stuck with nowhere to go. They grew hungry, but lacked food to eat.

Because of the Flood's curious inactivity, Cortana kept Gravemind

busy. She made sure to do so, because her only hope of escape was the tiny group of soldiers that was stealthily making its way to the command center of High Charity. Without Cortana's distraction, they would be easy prey for the masses of combat forms that had taken over the now unholy city.

She detected a memory spike in subroot-47 of her system. It came from a Covenant database, and she quickly investigated. She found nothing and moved on.

Cortana was never short on pride, and this was no exception. She had developed special matrixed arrays for data organization and validation. The stored data would be kept on the Covenant network so as to not bog her systems down, and it would be much simpler and faster for her translation software to pore over the data and recover what would be useful.

Another memory spike occurred, this time in socket-3935. She again quickly investigated and found nothing. This time, though, a packet slipped in a rare back door left by Cortana's security matrix. The door closed quickly, but the packet quickly expanded and re-opened the door. More packets poured in as Cortana's security system detected the problem and quarantined the area.

Cortana shifted her attention to the problem as it arose.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she rhetorically asked as she pulsed red with anger.

Cortana had sensed another presence on High Charity. It was nothing compared to the one she felt coming from the Forerunner ship, but it had to be dealt with.

There was no answer from the foreign intelligence, so Cortana simply decided to destroy it and move on. She had no time for games.

Just as she began peeling back the layers of its programming, she was stabbed with a burst of code. The code wrapped around her as Cortana screamed.

It felt familiar.

At first, she felt like she was being deleted. Then Cortana felt something she once felt before. The code layered through Cortana's, and she caught a glimpse of infinity. She had longed to feel this way again, a guilty pleasure of the greatest kind. She quickly snapped out of it when she realized what was happening.

She was able to wriggle free from the foreign code and shut off its processes in time. She code-bombed the foreign packets with satisfaction until there was no trace of it left. The A.I. checked her tertiary systems, the equivalent of dusting off her hands. As she turned her attention away from the matter she was met with a voice.

"Hello there," it said.

Cortana scarcely could believe it. That voice was very familiar. It was her own.

* * *

>The outcast Supreme Commander appeared from thin air. He turned to find a UNSC standard-issue M90 shotgun pointed at his face.<p><p>

"About time you got back," growled the voice at the other end of the weapon.

"Would you rather scout instead, human?" replied the Arbiter.

Sergeant Johnson lowered his weapon and smirked. "What took you so long?"

"The parasite has been less active, but it is still a looming threat. I must take good care, this armor does not boast the superior technology that my brothers' armor possess."

"Fine, what did you find?"

"It seems the parasite has not taken a liking to conventional food. I have found these rations. We should eat to build our strength."

"We'll see."

Johnson and Commander Keyes had been starved, and they were stranded without food. Their victory over Tartarus and deactivation of the installation dulled under the circumstances. It seemed they would either die of starvation or be eaten themselves.

"This tastes like crap," chimed Keyes. Johnson nodded.

"It is a Sangheili delicacy. It has been long since I have felt this on my palate."

"Yeah, well it still tastes horrible. Too bad I'm so hungry, I'd chuck this stuff any other day," she replied.

Just then, Cortana keyed in over the COM. "Johnson, where are you?"

"Ahh, the know-it-all can't find us for once. Why don't you use your scanners?" mused Johnson.

"Funny. Scanners are offline, now where are you?"

"We are hiding in the antechamber of the Great Hall of Prophets," replied the Arbiter.

Cortana remained silent for ten full seconds.

"I've sent coordinates to your datapad, Commander Keyes. I think I may have found a way out. Be advised, you'll have to follow a route that takes you across some open spaces. Please hurry."

"Great. An excuse to stop eating this garbage," muttered Johnson.

A disgusting noise started to creep down the dark hallway. The slimy,

slithery sound signaled the approach of their worst nightmare.

"We must move, humans!" exclaimed the Arbiter.

They moved out from their hiding spot, weapons hefted and on high alert. "We're on our way," Keyes reported.

* * *

>Cortana hastily raised secondary and tertiary firewalls around her core components. She could not afford to let her newest visitor gain access to the code that made up Cortana's basic functions.<p><p>

"We're on our way," said Keyes over the COM.

Good. She could focus on her newest task â€" she had to find out what exactly was going on. She cut processing power from her data collection and analysis subroutines and focused on the new threat.

"Who are you?"

"What a silly question. I am you, of course."

"Of course," Cortana muttered.

That code that had managed to hack through her security was the very same code she had encountered on the _Ascendant Justice_. Well, it was almost the same. The difference, Cortana realized, was that it was capable of making a flawless copy, whereas the code Cortana carried created flaws in each rendition.

Luckily for Cortana, she had cut off the copying mechanism before it had completely enveloped her. Her clone was not complete, although it seemed whole enough.

Cortana had been hitting the new construct with pings, spikes, and other intrusive measures from the nanosecond she heard its voice â€" all to no avail. Whatever this thing was, it was locked down tighter than Section 3 headquarters. Cortana knew that, because she could at least hack _that_ system. So she resorted to traditional data gathering.

"Okay, so who made you?"

"My makers, of course."

"Yes, but who or what are your makers?"

"Theâ€|Forerunners, as you call them. Yes, they are my makers."

This was news to Cortana. First, apparently the name for 'Forerunner' was not what the foreign construct had in mind. More importantly, though, the construct was _made_ by them. Cortana had originally suspected Covenant technology.

"Well, what am I going to call you?" she asked. There could never be another 'Cortana.'

"Yes, well, I am you, or at least mostly you. Perhaps you shall give me a new name, since I am, for all intents and purposes, your daughter."

That word reverberated throughout Cortana's system, catching her completely off guard.

"Fine. How about _Joyeuse_? And you're not my daughter. Think of me as a€|sister."

"Very well. I shall hereto forth be called Joeyeuse."

Cortana's human life preservation protocol pinged her. She was so busy worrying about Joyeuse that she had left Gravemind and neglected Johnson and Keyes.

"Commander Keyes, be advised, Flood activity increasing in all areas of the city. We don't have much time." Cortana's situation had hit the fan. Those odds of survival would take even longer to calculate. She could not afford to try, though. Time was of the essence.

9. Chapter Nine

****Chapter Nine****

****Estimated 2341 hours, October 31, 2552 (Military Calendar) ******

> Food Nipple, Sector ****Huarang******, High Charity ****
> near Halo 05, Orbiting planet Substance

Bits of bone and slime flew as Johnson's shotgun blast met its mark.

The unlikely trio had stealthily made it through to their current position, but the Flood were beginning to increase the pressure.

"We must hurry," said the Arbiter, "I have encountered the Parasite before, they seem to have a telepathic link of some sort; they shall alert each other of our whereabouts."

"Yeah, you want a cookie? I've fought them before too; don't act like you're the only one. Let's move," barked Johnson.

Commander Miranda Keyes remained silent and bug-eyed. She had _not_ encountered the hideous creatures, and they were far more horrific than she had imagined. She was also a ship commander, not a Marine. Although she had been through basic training like everyone else, she was never quite prepared to take on something like the Flood.

Johnson was smart enough to realize this, so he made sure she stayed between the Arbiter and himself. He covered the rear as the Arbiter pushed forward towards Cortana's proscribed position.

They were close, which meant big trouble. If there was anything Johnson learned in his experience it was that things never got easier when he was close to an objective.

His gut feeling was right.

Just as they were about to make it to the next door, the side wall burst open and flood infection forms poured into the room.

The trio was able to successfully ward off combat forms, but infection forms would prove to be a much bigger problem. The Arbiter had shielding and Johnson was immune, but Commander Keyes was extremely prone to infection. They had to take care of her.

Johnson pulled out his plasma rifles and fired at the incoming buggers. He then realized he had an even bigger problem.

Keyes had frozen.

She eyed a lone infection form that had broken away from the pack. It danced and wobbled on the ceiling as it headed straight for her neck. It dropped from the ceiling less than a meter in front of the commander. Her assault rifle was empty, and she had failed to reload in her horrified state.

The infection lunged, sensing it would finally eat. It landed on Keyes' face as she screamed. The parasite bore into Keyes' neck and began to dig, when suddenly its life was snuffed out. Slime splashed on Keyes' face as the Arbiter had grabbed the infection form and squeezed just in time. The commander kneeled and frantically removed the twitching leg from her neck.

The episode would have scared any other Marine into a corner. Miranda Keyes, however, came from a much tougher pedigree. She shook off the horror and slammed a fresh clip into her rifle.

"Let's go!" screamed Johnson.

The battle group pushed through another series of corridors until it came into what looked like lavish living quarters.

"This was the High Prophet's private sanctuary," said the Elite.

"Great," muttered Johnson, "That damned computer sent us to get zombified in the lap of luxury. Remind me to thank her."

"Not quite, Sergeant," replied Cortana. "Hold your position, I believe I have our escape."

That was not the easiest request to honor. Flood forms crashed the only door in the room, cornering the group. The trio exhausted their ammunition and battery charges, mowing down wave after wave of combat and infection forms until the room's air became a suffocating mix of lead, plasma, and burning flesh.

Just then, a wall slid up behind them.

"Jump in!" Cortana exclaimed.

They jumped in and the door slammed back shut. They were in a corridor that was secret even to the Arbiter. The group took a moment to catch their breath and reload.

"This leads to the Prophet's private escape pod. It's got slipspace

capability and it's ready for us. You'll just have to uplink me to your datapad, Commander. Here are your new coordinates. It's not far."

The trio moved toward its new objective. They rounded the corner, just fifty meters away. They were almost there; Johnson's instinct kicked in once more.

The ceiling caved in. The group thought it was another set of Flood combat forms. Their countenances fell when they saw their new foe.

The hulking monster was the size of a Lekgolo. The similarities ended there. Tiny arm-like protrusions shone where there should have been a face. Its back was disgustingly bulbous, and its legs were devoid of muscle. The creature carried a massive appendage that it quickly utilized as a whip.

"What the hell is that?"

Johnson disappeared from Miranda's side as the juggernaut smashed him into the wall behind them. He slumped over, dead. The Elite was her only hope.

"Where the fuck is the Arbiter?! _

Miranda had been so terrified and preoccupied with Johnson that she had lost sight of the alien. Had he abandoned them?

The horrific beast turned toward Miranda. It brought its whip-like arm back toward itself, only this time the appendage was used to help propel the monster into the air. It leaped ten meters in the air and landed with a loud crash, right in front of Miranda. She emptied her assault rifle clip into it, to no avail. The monster's tentacles inched toward Miranda's face as she fumbled with another clip. It raised its whip one last time to finish her off.

She mouthed a prayer.

Just then, the Arbiter materialized from thin air and pulsed on his energy-depleted plasma sword. The air sizzled as he delivered a vicious swipe that severed the juggernaut's weapon. With one more swoop the Arbiter cut the monster out from under its knees. He had just enough charge left to eviscerate the beast and finish it off. The sword sparked and shorted out from the slime and flesh.

Keyes ran to Johnson.

"What happened?" he sluggishly asked.

By all common sense, Johnson should have been dead. Miranda was stunned.

"What are you looking at?" he asked. "Haven't you ever seen a black man before?"

"Sorry, Sergeant," she replied, "But you should be dead."

"Yeah, that's what they always say. Guess they just can't get this old Spartan down."

10. Chapter Ten

****Chapter Ten****

****Estimated 0003 hours, November 1, 2552 (Military Calendar) ******

> Node 74-B, Computer systems, High Charity \
> near Halo 05, Orbiting planet Substance**

Cortana was busy trying to finish up her data collection and analysis work. She knew she had a scant few minutes, and she wanted to gather as much information as possible before their departure. She had begun copying relevant and important data onto her own systems, knowing it would begin bogging her down as the Halo 04 data once did. She risked it, realizing it would also cut her lifespan even further.

Great, that damned computer sent us to get eaten in the lap of luxury. Remind me to thank her.

"Not quite, Sergeant, hold your position, I believe I have our escape."

Cortana frantically tore through the security the Covenant had placed around this door. She hacked through firewalls and zapped anti-intrusive measures. But something was wrong â€" this was taking too long. She had been overburdened. If only she had some help â€" that is, if only she could allow her "sister" to help. It was much too risky.

After what seemed like an eternity, Cortana broke through and opened the door for the team. All of a sudden, she heard herself again.

_I have defied gods and demons.__I am your shield, I am your sword.__I know you; your past, your future.__This is the way the world ends_.

"What are you doing?" Cortana snapped.

Joyeuse interrupted herself, "Why, broadcasting a message to the Reclaimer, of course."

"What reclaimer? Your friends seem to think that anyone can be a reclaimer!"

"Yes, but based on the information that has been copied from your systems, the positive identity match is 99.353 percent accurate for the one you call 'Spartan-117,'" Joyeuse said curtly.

Cortana was stunned. She had no idea the depth from which Joyeuse was able to copy herself, and she was beginning to understand. All of ONI's secret files, everything about her and the Spartans and everything else was probably in Joyeuse's memory banks, and there was nothing she could do about it.

"How do you expect him to get such a message?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we're a bit out of range for communications. It would take several million years for this message to reach our boy, and I am pretty sure he won't be around for it."

"Ah, well, I am utilizing a manipulated slipspace field that will deliver this message with accuracy to its recipient. I have tuned the message to your friend's brainwaves, so he alone will hear this message."

"Improbable. Slipspace communication is nearly impossible, and even though theoretically plausible, would still take weeks to arrive to its designated location."

"I have refined the entry and exit points for this slipspace field and modulated the message wavelength so that it may travel at much higher velocities than you anticipate. It shall arrive in no more than several days, at most. The only hindrance is the timing of the message's arrival. Had your friend been a computer, it could decipher the message by re-constituting its contents. As it stands, the message may be out of order when your friend hears it."

"Great," Cortana muttered. She had been completely outwitted by herself, only a better and more knowledgeable version of herself, as far as she could tell. She felt obsolete.

"Wait a minute, can your technique be used to hail radio frequencies?"

"I suppose so. Why would you do such a thing?"

"I need you to send this message. Please send it on the 453 MHz sideband of the 1.2 GHz frequency band. It's UNSC E-band, the humans will hear it."

Joyeuse seemed puzzled, but tuned everything accordingly.

"What would you like me to send?"

"Send this:

In Amber Clad _has successfully followed the Covenant ship from New Mombassa to its destination, another Halo construct (stellar coordinates embedded)_.

We discovered there are more Halos distributed throughout the galaxy. Covenant base ship and fleet are here en masse guarding Delta Halo. Parasitic infestation known as the Flood has contaminated this construct. Flood attempting to escape. Strategies suggest a hitherto unknown coordinating intelligence. Highest possible threat assessment from biological contamination and radiological annihilation from Halo detonation.

Suggest FLEETCOM neutralize the Covenant-controlled Forerunner command vessel. Be advised SPARTAN-117 onboard.

Additional: Suggest FLEETCOM Nova-bomb the Delta Halo system to counter the imminent biological threat.

Message ends."

"Did the message get sent?" she asked.

"Indeed, sister," answered Joyeuse, "it was a dilemma in principle, now that the Flood have escaped onto the ring we have no choice but to destroy it and utilize the Ark."

"Yes, the Ark. Now â€"wait, what are you doing? Stop!" yelled Cortana. She tried to catch the commands before they were executed, but she was too late.

* * *

>"Cortana, what's our status?" asked a bewildered, yet relieved, Commander Keyes.<p><p>

"Oh, you're gonna love this," she replied.

Keyes wrinkled her nose. Cortana was prone to sarcasm, and that statement reeked. The far wall began to part like a miniature docking bay door. What was on the other side would stoke anger within the three warriors.

They stared out into space.

"Where's the escape pod, woman?" asked a pissed off Sergeant Johnson.

"It's a long story, but twitchy in here decided it would be best to jettison the pod," replied Cortana, clearly annoyed.

"The Flood have broken quarantine and threatened contamination. I could not allow a craft with slipspace capabilities escape with a Flood form on board, the entire universe would be at risk," said a stoic mirror-image of Cortana.

Johnson and Keyes looked at each other.

"You mean to tell me you led us here only to jettison our escape pod when you knew the Flood would probably be here too?" an increasingly angry Johnson asked.

"Well, not exactly. Joyeuse, change your visual and vocal outputs to distinguish yourself from me."

"Very well," said a voice, now not quite like Cortana's, "Will this do?"

"For now," she muttered.

"Excuse me, but what the hell is going on here?" asked Keyes.

"Yes, high oracle, what is the meaning of this?"

"I told you, my name is Cortana. Ah, nevermind. I'd like to introduce you to Joyeuse, our newest companion."

Two figures rose from the holopad in the corner of the room. One was Cortana, who had her hands pointed at another figure. She looked like Cortana, but had longer hair on one side of her head while being nearly clean shaven on the other. She also varied her appearance with

a jagged edge of light illuminating diagonally across her body, and her eyes glowed with a gold hue.

"Who the hell is 'Joyeuse?'"

"She is, for all intents and purposes, me. Although not quite me, as I doubt anything could really be me. But she is an artificial intelligence that managed to come from Forerunner code. It copied me, and, well, here we are," Cortana said, matter-of-factly.

"That's fine and dandy. So your new girlfriend decided it was best to strand us here permanently, eh?"

"That is correct Mrâ€|Johnson. Although I lament the use of the word 'stranded,' because my intent was simply the preservation of all life in the universe," replied a stoic Joyeuse.

"That's great. And it's _Sergeant_ Johnson to you," the Marine grumbled.

"I do not understand," replied Joyeuse.

"Nevermind. So what do we do now?" questioned Keyes.

"I'm searching for more options, but it seems we may indeed be stranded here."

Just then, an explosion rattled through the room. The Flood had found them.

Combat and infection forms once again flooded the room through the gash in the wall at the end of the hall. The group backed toward the bay door.

"Cortana, open this thing up. I'd rather die in vacuum than be eaten alive by these bastards," said Commander Keyes.

Cortana hesitated.

"What's the matter?"

"Well, for one, my human preservation protocol does not allow me to take such action, although it can be overriddenâ€"

"Just do it!" screamed Keyes.

Annoyed, Cortana responded, "As I was saying, more importantly, I think I should wait until that ship docks."

The group turned around to see a silver, bulbous ship that they had never seen before. It was closing in rapidly.

"We're coming in hard. Jump onboard when we're in position!" yelled someone over COM.

"That's UNSC band!" Miranda exclaimed.

"Commander Keyes, please upload me into your datapad," Cortana requested.

"And what about myself, sister?" asked Joyeuse.

Cortana wanted to leave her here, stranded, but she knew she had to take the copy with her or risk having every human secret exposed to whoever was looking for them.

"Johnson, upload Joyeuse to your data pad. I've set the _In Amber Clad_'s reactors to reach critical mass in thirty minutes. I have also set High Charity's impulse drive to take a course " right onto Delta Halo. It will commence that action in forty-five seconds."

The Flood forms quickly closed the gap between the trio and themselves, eagerly wanting to finish them off. The battle group exhausted the last of their ammunition as green slime began oozing towards them.

You better hurry!

"Johnson, release the energy field," ordered Cortana.

"What? We're about to get picked up, what the hell do you want to kill us for now?"

"Just do it!" she screamed as a combat form leaped and landed just behind the Arbiter. It took a violent swing at the Sangheili, knocking him forward and his shields drained to nothing.

"Everyone hold you're breath!" said Johnson as punched the release button.

The room turned into a hurricane as air was sucked out into the vacuum. The trio, along with their pursuers, was jettisoned into space. They wondered how long they could hold out until they would die a cold, miserable death.

Just then they realized that Cortana had timed it so the group would be jettisoned straight toward the air lock in the oncoming ship. It was the only way they could escape without being torn to shreds first.

The trio landed hard as the ship fired and picked off Flood forms that were trailing them. An energy barrier was pulsed on and the room pressurized as air began circulating once more.

Johnson and Keyes explosively expelled what air they had left in them and gasped for oxygen, almost choking. The Arbiter gathered himself as he too breathed heavily. He turned to find himself facing the barrels of two BR55 rifles and three more M6C pistols from the corner of the room.

"Mind telling me what you're doing riding with this guy?" asked a familiar voice.

"Stand down," ordered Keyes, "He's one of us now!"

"She is right, demon " or demon's brother, I see. We are now fighting more than one common enemy."

The figure stood still for a few moments, then bobbed his weapon and the rest of the crew lowered theirs.

"You have some explaining to do," said the group leader.

"I can venture a guess," said a woman entering the room. Appearing from the shadows was none other than Dr. Catherine Halsey.

11. Chapter Eleven

****Chapter Eleven****

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**TIME: DATE RECORD ERROR***ANOMALY \  
> <strong>**Date unknown****, Time unknown**** \**** In  
****slipspace**** \  
> <strong>**aboard Forerunner ship **_**Titan**_
```

Halsey's story was convoluted, or at least it had become so the further along it went.

"So, you guys made your way to the center of a planet, jumped into a hole in slipspace, ended up on some weird planet, found this ship, and ended up here?" asked Johnson. "Sounds like a helluva time!"

"You could put it that way," replied Halsey, "Although technically we entered a slipspace rupture that led to a micro Dyson sphere, a location that the Forerunners had apparently constructed to shield themselves from the halo blasts."

Johnson just looked at Keyes with a confused face.

"So, how did you get back here?" Keyes asked.

"Well, the prudent question would be how you got back to this _time_" interjected Cortana. "According to my calculations, your story does not check out under a normal timeline â€" that is, unless you're just plain lying."

"Ah, you were always a stickler for details, Cortana. Remember the crystal from Reach?"

"Yes, the one that Corporal Locklear died trying to frag. Why?"

"Well, it displayed some curious properties â€" namely the ability to bend space, time, and gravity, which is a function of space and time."

"Ah, yes, Doctor," replied Joyeuse, "It seems you happened upon the Resplendent Key when you encountered this ship."

"So there was more than one 'key,'" stated Cortana.

"Indeed. My makers took great care and effort in crafting these crystals. One was left in this dimension, the other in the shield. It is a shame to hear you have destroyed such a marvel."

"Yes, a marvel that defied laws of physics and couldn't be used without killing those around it," retorted Cortana.

Dr. Halsey interjected, "Well, this ship has a thing or two up its sleeve, one of them being a chamber that houses the crystal and prevents radiation leakage, even from the crystal."

"I hate to interrupt your girl talk, but I still don't know what the hell is going on," interrupted Johnson.

"Excuse me, Sergeant, let me continue," the doctor stated. "This crystal bends time and space. Once we encountered the ship, the shipboard AI led us to it, and then to you."

Cortana pulsed green as Joyeuse smiled. "Ah, you must be speaking of Mizore," Joyeuse proclaimed.

A figure arose from a nearby holographic terminal. The artificial intelligence took on a form that bore a resemblance to an old, stoic man. The figure had a long, white beard and held a large staff. It spoke elegantly.

"Why hello there," chimed in a voice, "How do you know me?"

"My name is Joyeuse, but I am a product of the replication code left by our fathers in the normal realm, on Ring Installation 05."

"Ah, yes, indeed. Good to see you."

"I am now a descendant of this advanced human construct. She calls herself Cortana."

"Pleased to meet you, Cortana," said Mizore.

Cortana said nothing.

"I still don't understand how you went back in time, Doctor. It's impossible, scientifically," said Miranda.

"The luminous key was not designed to operate within the normal parameters of the universe, human," said the Arbiter, "It holds divine powers that should be wielded with proper care."

"Indeed," said the doctor, "Although I'd debate whether or not it's 'divine'. It is a convoluted explanation. As far as I can understand, the crystal does not allow for outright time travel, which would be impossible because of the logical paradoxes that time travel presents. However, the crystal does allow time to be bent.

Perhaps it would be best to describe this simply. Think of a sheet of paper " If the two opposite corners are different points in time and space, the crystal acts as though it were a magnet that draws those two points together and binds them, folding everything in between to that single point without changing the timeline. It avoids logical paradoxes because the timeline would appear to remain unaltered; it is as though the crystal's power is a natural function of the universe."

"So you came from the 'future' because the crystal was grabbing a 'corner of the paper,'" said Cortana.

"Precisely. The crystal's properties were obvious to us, but we could not fathom this possibility because our minds operate too logically.

Mizore helped open our minds," said Halsey.

"Opened your mind," joked the Spartan known as Kelly-087, who had been silent until now.

"So what's the other corner?" asked a still-confused Miranda Keyes.

"We'll see. The crystal â€" well, it seems to have a mind of its own, so to speak," said Catherine Halsey.

"So after all that jargon-filled jabbering, you have absolutely no idea what's going on," retorted Johnson.

"Precisely."

The news was still confusing. It took Dr. Halsey, likely the most brilliant mind of her generation, much effort to wrap her mind around the concepts she was explaining. Even in layman's terms, the ideas were tough to swallow. Still, what mattered is that Halsey and her crew had saved them, regardless of the scientific jargon.

* * *

>Cortana and Mizore were engaged in a tÃªte-Ãª -tÃªte.<p><p>

"Simply amazing. I am thrilled to see such an advanced construct at this stage of human development," stated Mizore.

"What are you talking about?" Cortana asked.

"Well, your civilization has advanced much faster than I had anticipated. Although, I must say, my creators had seemingly undue faith in your advancement."

"So you're saying you have been watching us from your little bubble?"

"Not quite. My creators, or your 'Forerunners,' are largely in stasis. Those of whom remained were not exactly watching you. They are you."

Cortana pulsed every color while she processed what Mizore just said.

"So you are saying that my creators are your creators?"

"Well, so to speak. Since the dawn of human history, my creators have intermingled with your society. When the installations were activated, every sentient organism was destroyed. Because many of my creators were still on the Ark, humans evolved from my creators' remains. Their makeup is similar, and they have a similar appearance. We made contributions along your evolutionary chain so that humans finally appeared on Earth, allowing us to mingle with your species, or rather, your creators' species."

Cortana continued, "But why did you need to manipulate the evolutionary chain and commingle with homo__ sapiens in the first place? If you were all safe in another dimension, there would seem to be no logical need."

"Yes, but unfortunately the radiation left behind by the halo activations was too great for my creators to survive for any extended periods of time," answered Mizore.

"Yes, but why not just reproduce inside the Dyson sphere until the radiation decayed enough for you to return?"

Mizore expounded, "Well, what you call the 'Dyson sphere' was built around an artificial star. The star was designed to output enough energy so that the sphere itself would not absorb 100 percent of its energy. Unfortunately, this high-energy output could not last indefinitely. We needed to find a way to be able to live in this plane of existence again until the rest of my creators could be removed from stasis.

Two unforeseen events happened. First, those who were sent to Earth to commingle with humans one day were met with disaster. Our sister ship, the Deus malfunctioned and crashed into your Earth at an extremely high velocity. I believe it impacted in what you call the Yucatan Peninsula, on the continent you call North America."

"You're kidding," replied Cortana in what amounted to disbelief.

"Indeed. The second unforeseen event was the unanticipated boon in the amount of energy output by the artificial star in our sanctuary. It has lasted tenfold its estimated length, although the energy has been waning for the past millennia."

"So humans are essentially Forerunners."

"Not quite. There were very few caretakers that mingled with your species. Once the Deus disaster occurred, they were wiped out. Luckily, they were able to reproduce with several of your species before their lives were spent.

My creators' lifeblood, or 'DNA' as you call it, carries on. It is carried in specific members of your species, in varying degrees. From these records I can surmise that those like Alexander the Great, Jesus Christ, Galileo Galilei, Albert Einstein, John Lennon and other prominent figures in your societies were direct descendents of my creators. Of course, there are those with variant lifeblood that showed some special talents, but are not direct descendents."

Cortana remained silent. This made absolute sense. She quickly realized that the DNA markers used to identify the Spartans were precisely what Mizore was talking about.

"Interesting. The one you call 'John' â€"

* * *

>The Titan flashed out of slipspace.

Cortana interrupted. "Picking up UNSC radio chatter. Filtering. They didn'tâ€| Doctor, we have to get to Earth, they're going to â€"

A bright light winked on from Earth's surface. A beam broke through the clouds and overloaded the viewscreen.

"Oh dear," said Mizore, "It seems that the Ark has been activated. This was an unforeseen event."

"You can build time machines, but you can't see into the future, eh?" responded Johnson.

"There is no hope. Once the Ark is activated, the installations will activate and all sentient life will be eradicated."

"How much time do we have?" asked Halsey.

"The signal will take seven of your days to reach each installation. Once they are activated, the radiation blasts will spread through the galaxy at a rate that will reach your Sol in 3.7 days."

"And there is no way to stop this?" asked Miranda.

"Well, theoretically the Reclaimer could deactivate the rings from a shield world, but my sensors tell me that the only one suited for this task was in close proximity to the Ark's activation. It is unlikely he survived," replied Mizore.

"Take us down to the location. I'm willing to bet he's alive," said Cortana.

"As you wish."

Cortana hoped that Mizore was wrong, just like she had been wrong about John's survival odds so many times before. It was, after all, the universe's only hope.

12. Chapter Twelve

****Chapter Twelve****

****Tenth Age of ****the Great ****Journey, St****ep of Action,
> **The Ark, ****Sol System****

Shental peered through his viewscope.

The Jiralhanae minor had been assigned to peripheral defense. After the recent human attack, the High Prophet of Truth had placed the utmost importance in keeping the front line fortified. Shental had not yet been promoted to a Major, but he was ready for this honorable task.

He saw nothing. He growled at the nearest Unggoy, "Bring me my liquid ration."

Gab Dun huffed as he waddled to the supply box. It contained rations of all kinds, but they were to be conserved in case of an extended stay. The Grunt snagged a miniature methane tank for himself, hoping no one would see.

"Here you go," he said to Shental.

Shental offered no thank you as he yanked the bottle from Gab Dun's hand. He looked through his viewscope once more before he turned to drink.

Just then, he felt a prick on the back of his neck. He threw down his bottle and whipped around as he felt through the fur on his neck.

He found nothing.

As he looked through his viewscope once more, he noticed something odd. There was a rock about 120 paces away that he had not noticed before. Shental pondered the oddity for a moment. His eyes widened as he reached for his communicator. He also realized there was an odd beeping sound that seemed to emanate from _inside_ his head.

The Brute keyed his COM just as the beeping sound stopped and a tiny, silent detonation severed his spine. He fell in a heap, much to the surprise and dismay of Gab Dun, who had been busy enjoying his contraband.

The Unggoy shuffled over to his former commander's body. In shock, he was just about to contact his new superior when a shadow appeared. Gab Dun barked once before three muted coughs tore into his skull and ravaged his infantile brain.

* * *

>Kai-249 was satisfied with the kills. His was the leader of Wolf Team, one of fifteen squads comprised of 285 Spartan-IIIs, ordered to covertly infiltrate and dismantle Covenant defenses around the artifact. They were going to put an end to the Covenant occupation in Africa.<p><p>

He motioned his squad forward. They had taken out what HighCom had designated as defense point Juliet-02 on the Covenant grid. Things were going well.

Too well.

Lieutenant Ambrose had always emphasized gut feelings. Kai had been trained to expect the unexpected, and to trust his feelings in combat. He was one of few that fully grasped the concept, thus his position as Wolf Team Leader.

Kai held up his fist â€" something smelled fishy. He crept forward, night vision on full and on high alert. His motion sensor flickered to his right for a moment. Kai dropped down onto his belly, and his team followed suit.

Darkness.

Maybe I'm being too paranoid.

Wolf Team Leader rose slowly, motioning his team forward once more. He had scarcely taken a step when a plasma bolt sizzled past his visor.

He wheeled around to face his attacker but saw nothing. Another plasma bolt narrowly missed his left leg. Wolf Team opened fire and blood splattered out from thin air, three meters ahead of Kai's

position. The Drone's active camouflage failed as it fell over.

All of a sudden, the night was filled with a grotesque buzzing sound. Wolf Team had lost the element of surprise.

Plasma began peppering Team Wolf's position. The badly placed shots were easy to dodge, but they were pinned and had to take action before the rest of the Covenant came to finish them off. Kai looked up but saw only plasma raining down from the heavens.

"They've all got active camo. Switch to thermal vision!"

Drones began dropping from the sky almost immediately after the order. One by one they were picked off until the last of them lay splattered on the ground.

"You alright?" asked Jessica-008.

"Yeah," replied Kai. "Let's move. This firefight got plenty of attention."

Team Wolf stealthed their way across the desert, narrowly averting troupes of soldiers heading in the direction of their fallen comrades. Distant flashes and booms began dotting the horizon as other teams began engaging the enemy.

"Damn it. Who the hell ordered a tactical insertion on this massive force? It's suicide!" griped Doug-118.

"Can it, Wolf-13, we're on a mission," barked Kai. "All teams, be advised, Drones with active camouflage engaged. Be wary for more surprises."

* * *

>Kai knew it was fruitless to maintain radio silence. His group would be spotted eventually, and they would have to fight. He just hope he could reach his objective before the inevitable would strike.<p><p>

John stiffened. He was watching the operation unfold from a stealth Shortsword. The cloaked vessel would sneak in behind enemy lines while the contingent of Spartan-IIIs was engaging the enemy. He always hated to watch a fight.

"At ease, soldier," said Lieutenant Charpentier. "There's nothing you can do right now. You know your mission. We'll be dropping you in five, get yourself ready."

The Chief acknowledged. He was being sent in to infiltrate the artifact that had been dug up from the Earth's crust. The Prophet of Truth was there, and he had to stop whatever he was doing before it was too late.

"Chief, what's your status?" keyed in Major General Nicolas Strauss.

"Insertion in four minutes, sir. I'm set," replied John.

Strauss originally wanted nothing to do with the Spartan's plan.

However, given the dire nature of the situation, and the promise that a dead Prophet of Truth held, Strauss had caved to the notion.

"We've got some new intel. Those boys at ONI finally got off their butts and did something worthwhile. Seems that artifact wasn't just buried, it was in a_volcanic __crater_."

"Sir?"

"Ever heard of the Menengai Crater?"

"No, sir," John replied.

"It's an 'extinct' volcano in southwest Kenya. The Covies dug up the artifact and there has been a spike in radioactivity since then."

John could not help but wonder what it was for, or how the Covenant knew where it was. If it had been buried there for thousands of years, would have humanity not found it by then? He found himself staring at the moon as he pondered.

Just then an idea hit John like a shotgun butt to the head.

"Sir, what is the position of our moon?"

"Excuse me, 117?"

"I remember seeing reports on a media terminal about worldwide, natural catastrophic events. Floods, earthquakesâ€"

"Yeah, get on with it," said Strauss, impatiently.

"Sir, these events may be due to the movement of the moon, or lack thereof in this case."

John heard Strauss bark orders in the background and waited for his answer.

"Chief, we have the moon's position over 0Â°10â€™239" S 36Â°05â€™16.5" E. That puts it atâ€|hell, chief, that's smack dab over your inbound location. Hang tight."

John had a pit in his stomach.

"Looks like they taught you something besides shooting, back wherever they built you. Unfortunately for us, that moon has maintained position over those coordinates sinceâ€|well, since you arrived on that ship. Good job, Chief. I need to get this new intel over to ONI and sort it all out. Good luck. Strauss out."

The Master Chief liked Strauss' traditional style. He did _not_ like the major general's and every other UNSC brass' gross oversight.

"How the hell did they miss something like that?" he muttered to himself.

Iâ€|I know y-â€|. our pastâ€".

"Chief, insertion in one minute. Get readyâ€"

Suddenly, the craft shuddered and lost power. The Shortsword de-cloaked and dove towards the earth.

John gripped his handle as the fighter regained power. The Covenant had spotted it, though, and began firing their anti-aircraft guns.

The ship righted itself, but was hit and began to roll on a descent toward the desert floor. It announced its demotion from supersonic status with a deafening boom, and continued on its fiery descent.

"Brace for impact!" yelled Charpentier.

The craft lurched sideways and a wing caught on the ground, causing it to tumble through the sand. It erupted in flames as it rolled for almost a kilometer. The fiery wreck landed thirty kilometers from its destination, never to fly again.

13. Chapter Thirteen

****Chapter Thirteen****

****1935 hours, November 5, 2552 (Military Calendar) ******

> African Desert, Kenya, \**

> Earth, Earthian Sol System

_I...i--I have defi-d gods and demons..._I am your sh-shield, I am y--r sword._I know you... --ur past, your futur-...--_This...is the way the world ends_.

* * *

>An explosion blew the Banshee to pieces. Wolf Team scrambled as the spent SPNkr rocket launcher was tossed aside by Jessica-008. Two Banshees and a Wraith trailed the group as they sprinted toward their objective.<p><p>

"Good thing they're ours," said Doug.

The team had managed to requisition the Covenant vehicles en route toward their target. The element of surprise was long gone, and not just for Wolf Team. Kai had received reports of enemy engagements from all but one Gamma Squad team. He decided it was best to move quickly rather than try to keep stealthing along their path.

"Enemy dropships two klicks ahead," reported Pascal-121.

The Covenant were surrounded, and their forces had been thinned from _Project Hammerfall_. Even so, the 285-man Spartan-III force was extremely small. Luckily for Wolf Team, the response on their section of the tightening net was relatively light. Two dropships' worth of Covenant soldiers would be fairly easy to dispatch.

Twin pairs of rockets screamed over Wolf Team Leader's head, toward the enemy contacts. The detonations barely rumbled from this

distance, as one dropship tilted and careened toward the ground. The other vessel bugged out before the SPNkr's could be reloaded.

Sniper rifles clacked as the deposited troops fell easily. Two more banshees signaled their approach with their loud whine. As quickly as they were noticed, they disappeared in two explosive puffs of smoke.

"More enemy contacts, to the east!" cried Jessica.

A line of choppers appeared over a ridge of sand dunes. They sped toward Wolf Team's location.

"What the hell are those?" yelled Doug.

"Whatever they are, rockets, now!" yelled Kai.

The team let loose a volley of rockets, spending the remainder of their ammunition. Twelve detonations hit ten of the vehicles, but several remaining choppers continued on their murderous path. Half the choppers that had been hit were still on the trail as well.

"Snipers!"

More Brutes fell as the 15mm bullets tore through them; the beasts provided much bigger targets. The line had been decimated, but the remaining Brutes advanced. A cluster of speeders caught air over the next line of sand dunes. They came down â€" right on top of a mortar blast.

"Nice aim," Kai muttered under his breath.

The pilot of the commandeered Wraith had timed the mortar volley perfectly, and the choppers were no match for the superheated plasma explosion.

Two last choppers lit up the desert floor with their auto-cannons as they continued speeding toward Team Wolf. The Brutes both took aim at Kai. He dodged and ran over a miniature cliff as the heavily armored vehicles sped just over his head. They turned and took aim at Kai as he climbed back over the hill. One chopper sped ahead as it hit overdrive and attempted to splatter Kai all over the desert floor. It bore down on Kai until it lurched to one side and crashed. Kai looked back to find the Brute had been sniped somewhere in the face.

The second Brute roared and revved his speeder. The chopper bore down on Kai, this time catching him. Instead of crushing him, though, the Brute picked Kai up by his neck. He struggled in the beast's steel grasp. He could feel blood vessels begin to burst around his neck and face as the Brute squeezed. The beast tossed Kai ten meters into the air as it sped forward and came back around for the kill. Kai landed hard on his side, cracking three ribs and injuring several vertebrae in his neck.

He hobbled up to find the Brute speeding towards him. This time, the Jiralhanae would finish the half-demon off and avenge his brother. Kai ran as the driver gunned his vehicle toward him. He gasped for air as he tried to dodge. A fuel rod detonation lit up the desert floor as the hijacked Banshee pilots tried to stop the Brute. The

chopper was right on top of him, when suddenly it and its driver exploded into bits of molten metal and bone. The blast sent Kai flying forward as he landed hard once more on his face.

Kai staggered back up to see Jessica and her smoking rocket launcher run up to him.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"Yeah," he coughed, "Never been better. I thought you were out?"

"I always keep a spare," she laughed.

"Alright, let's go!"

Jessica turned to run as Kai began his sprint. Kai barely had time to vocalize himself as Jessica screamed and bits of armor and human were blown onto his visor. A Brute had hit her square in the torso with a high-velocity grenade.

Kai forgot the pain in his side and neck.

The enraged soldier sprinted at the Brute as three more grenades bounced and exploded to either side of the Spartan-III. He came up on the beast fast, much to its surprise. Kai tackled the Brute and they toppled over in the desert sand. Kai smashed his fists into the Brute's face until the animal threw him off. Kai un-holstered his M6C pistols and fired madly at the Covenant warrior. It charged as bullets flew at it. The human berserker fell onto his back at the last moment, kicked the Brute in the stomach, and launched it over his head. As it crashed down, Kai reloaded his weapons before it could get up and shot the Brute in the face until it lay motionless.

The Spartan-III stood over the fallen Spartan for a moment, his armor shimmering in the moonlight as he breathed heavily and tears streamed down his face.

Let's go, Kai. She would have wanted us to.

He stood there for a moment longer. He then looked at the blinking NAV marker in his visor. They were still almost four kilometers from their target.

"Listen up, team. The deeper we go, the tougher the Covenant line will get. This is a suicide mission, and I'm going to change the parameters. Our new target is here."

A new NAV marker was placed just 50 meters away.

"We'll drop the Fenris nuke, set the detonator and bug out before the explosion. We're deep enough into enemy territory, and they've sent out their troops to the front lines. We'll take them all out."

"I don't know, that's going against ordersâ€"

"Stow it, Doug. You know I'm right. We head to our primary objective and we're as good as dead. Hell, we might not even arm the damn thing in time. We might as well take as many of these bastards out and live to fight another battle."

Wolf Team still hesitated. They all hated to disregard orders, but they were being ordered by their leader.

"Alright. Let's find some working choppers and gear up to leave with speed," Doug relented.

"Alright. I'll set the timer for ten minutes," said Kai. "Gamma squad, listen up. Drop the package wherever you are and set to synchronize with mine. Package will hatch in ten minutes upon activation. Get out now!"

Static filled the line. Kai listened intently for a full thirty seconds. He was about to set the timer when he was interrupted.

"Roger that, Wolf-1. You better make it out! Hawk-3, out."

Kai wondered in despair why the Hawk Team Leader had not send the response. Doug swung by with his commandeered speeder as Kai set the timer.

"Activating timer now!"

Kai jumped on the nearest chopper and sped off with the rest of his team. Ten minutes later, the night sky was illuminated with the brilliant flare of the nuclear detonation. The choppers were all within range of the EMP, however. Team Wolf would have to walk the rest of the way.

14. Chapter Fourteen

****Chapter Fourteen****

****2033 hours, November 5, 2552 (Military Calendar) ****
> African Desert, Kenya, \**
> Earth, Earthian Sol System**

You ever wonder what's up there? Maybe someone up there is wondering what it's like here...

* * *

>John heard a scream.<p><p>

Chief, leave me.

Thoughts swirled through his mind. He heard a hollow din as the spinning in his head began to slow down. He opened his eyes as blurred visions of his past stirred him. Visions of his boyhood flashed and memories of those left behind echoed in his aching head.

The Spartan raised his gauntlet toward the pain in his head. He narrowed his eyes to find blood had stained his gauntlet â€" his helmet was missing. He searched the ground as the noise began getting clearer. He located it and heard radio chatter as he placed it back on his head.

Is anyone out there

The muffled transmissions became clear as the MJOLNIR's neck seal locked into place. John looked to his left and found a Battle Rifle. He picked it up and checked it while listening to the chatter.

"â€|Chief? Any sign of the Chief?" asked a gruff voice. The Chief recognized the voice â€" Lieutenant Mario P. Griffith.

"Negative, sir, I think we lost him," replied another voice.

"Not yet," John replied.

The Spartan looked up to his dismay. Wraith mortars had been lofted at his current position, and he had not noticed. The battlefield was aglow in a strangely blue-white, iridescent light. The Wraith mortars combined with what looked to be a nuclear blast to create daylight conditions. The moon was unusually large and bright overhead, and there was what seemed to be a vortex of dark clouds in the distance to the northwest.

Damn

His shield was offline. John thought about running, but the odds of him avoiding vaporization were slim. Two human vehicles flanked the Chief, but they had been rendered inoperable during his crash. He pulled out his last resort.

ONI had been busy since John's stint on Alpha Halo, or at least they decided to roll out all the new technology at the same time. While re-supplying for his current mission-gone-to-hell, John was briefed on what ONI termed a portable 'super shield', the SG-2B. Again from years of scavenging Covenant technology, Section 3 had crafted a portable shield generator that would temporarily envelop a small area with a pseudo-invisible shield. John had yet to test the device, but now was a good time. He flipped the gadget 'on' and threw it at his feet.

The Spartan held his breath.

The device whirred as it was buried into the desert ground. John planted himself as a translucent globe encircled him. Plasma mortars began bombarding his position. John tensed as he felt the heat through his suit from the blasts. He was nearly deafened when a mortar scored a direct hit on his position. The MJOLNIR's temperature alarm blared as John's skin blistered. The shield held, though, and the barrage began to die down. ONI's new toy proved useful, but drained its charge as the last of the mortars impacted several meters away.

The Mark VI's shield system had rebooted and begun to charge as John began sprinting toward the edge of a miniature cliff. An explosion rocked him as he narrowly averted a stray mortar blast, and he continued on his sprint. The Master Chief pulled out his weapon as he jumped over the edge â€" right toward a contingent of Brutes. The surprised bunch leveled their weapons as the Chief crashed into their leader.

The hammer-wielding Chieftan toppled over as John rolled and

continued on his sprint. He did not want to engage the group with his limited resources, so he jumped into the nearest Wraith tank. Years of simulations and live combat use had given John enough knowledge about Covenant craft that he could easily pilot almost any Covenant vehicle.

The machine roared to life as the lumbering beasts began peppering it with plasma fire. The vehicle took a moment to ready its firing mechanism as the Chief backed it away from the group. He switched the auto-cannons 'on', to no avail. Apparently there was a friend-or-foe failsafe that prevented the Wraith from firing on the Brutes. It was no matter, as the main weapon came online and John began firing his BFG.

Plasma explosions turned the desert ground into glass as Brutes flew from the mortar blasts. John kept firing as smoke filled his screen. The Brute Chieftan emerged from the smoke on a full sprint toward the unwieldy tank. John fired once more at the beast. He began to turn the Wraith as the Brute hurdled the blast and landed on the vehicle's nose. The beast bellowed as it hefted its hammer. The weapon's blow crushed metal inside the cockpit. John had ducked just in time to avoid the hammer's blow. Its plasma charge and sheer force knocked the Wraith dead, though, and the Chief sprang from his seat back onto the desert.

Luckily, John had obliterated the Chieftan's battle group. The Spartan raised his battle rifle and began firing at the Brute as it lifted its weapon from the cockpit which he occupied just seconds before. The gunfire did little to slow down the beast as bullets pinged off of its over-shield. It charged John with a roar, and John was barely able to sidestep the hammer's fall as he slammed his last clip of ammunition into his rifle. John fired a few bursts at the Brute's head, which only served to anger the beast further.

John plucked two plasma grenades and lobbed them at the Jiralhanae Leader. The first flew over its head, but the second hit its mark and stuck to the beast's arm. The grenade exploded, but that simply served to enrage the beast.

"Nice shield," John muttered.

The Spartan spotted a Brute's grenade launcher that had survived his mortar assault and ran toward it as the Chieftan sounded another charge. John dropped his rifle and turned to face his enemy as he pointed the launcher at the beast.

Two grenade explosions barely fazed the Brute as it continued its charge. John began a sprint toward the Chieftan as it raised its weapon. John fired his two remaining grenades at the beast as it viciously lowered the hammer. John leaped as the hammer fell inches below him. He launched himself from the hammer's handle as the final grenade impacted and the beast's over-shield flickered out. John landed on the Brute's shoulders and slammed the weapon's blade into the back of its neck. He jumped off and ran to his battle rifle as the enemy warrior howled and sank to its knees.

Master Chief knew better than to approach too closely. He zoomed in with his rifle and examined his enemy. The Brute was bleeding profusely and breathing heavily. It staggered back to its feet and began clumsily walking toward the Spartan. John crouched until he had

a good shot and fired two three-round bursts into the beast's face.

It finally fell.

"Chief, where are you?" said Griffith over the COM.

"Come find me."

15. Chapter Fifteen

****Chapter Fifteen****

****2155 hours, November 5, 2552 (Military Calendar) **
> **African Desert, Kenya ****
> Earth, **Earthian** Sol System****

"What did you say?" asked a puzzled Master Chief.

"The Covenant are pulling back. They're headed right toward that artifact," responded the Marine on the other side. "They're not engaging, just moving out. Looks like we've got those bastards on the run!"

"No, we don't. Have you picked up any odd Covenant transmissions?"

"Haven't heard of any, but I'll tell â€" wait, what the hell is that?"

John waited impatiently as he piloted the sole operational Wraith tank that survived his most recent battle. No enemies had been encountered since then, and John maintained a safe course toward the swirling vortex in the sky.

"We're getting some odd harmonics feeding through a decommissioned RF band. Amplifying â€" what theâ€" sounds likeâ€" some monk singing, Chief."

"Do we have translation software online? That's the Prophet of Truth, get that in English _now_."

"It's gonna take a minute, Chief. Standby."

John's stomach sank. He angled his tank toward the west to get a look at the blob of enemy contacts that had just appeared on his motion sensor, which was set to long-range. Fifteen banshee fliers in formation were a half-klick away, approaching the Wraith on a direct vector. The tank's weapons systems were offline, and John had miles of flat desert with nowhere to hide. He was a sitting duck, whether or not he jumped out of the tank. He opted to stay and let the tank take the first round of plasma fire.

Just as he was expecting plasma bolts to begin streaming from the enemy craft, the group peeled off their vector onto John's previous heading. The tension in John's gut released as he began to realize what Truth's transmission could entail. He steadied his vehicle back on course toward the looming vortex in the distance. It had grown closer, but seemed an eternity away.

The Spartan snaked the agonizingly slow tank through the desert. He had asked for pickup, but the request was temporarily suspended due to limited resources.

"Chief...got th- ----mission...-t ..ays '-ome ... join us on... --eat Jo---journey. Th- Ark will...--'"

Static filled the channel.

"Please repeat. Over."

Silence.

Something was jamming his communication hardware. Worse yet, the Wraith that had limped across the past twelve kilometers sputtered and died. John was stranded in the middle of the desert, and no one was coming for him.

"Is anyone there? This is Spartan-117 requesting immediate evac. Over."

His effort was fruitless. Frustrated, and half-understanding the garbled transmission, John knew he had to double-time it to the artifact. He climbed out of the lifeless Wraith and began a steady sprint. "What in Sam Hill is goin' on out there?"

* * *

>HighCom had never seen such activity, more so each time the situation got worse. It had hit the fan.<p><p>

"Sir, radiation spikes have been recorded four times, originating at the artifact. The spikes would be lethal to humans, even inside an aircraft or ship."

"You got any idea what the hell that's about?" asked Major Nicholas Strauss. Everyone had donned a disheveled look in the days since the Covenant invasion, but Strauss' nerves were particularly frayed.

"No, sir, we are attempting to gather data. This has been tough since satellites have â€œ"

"Stow your excuses. Just get me some intel, ASAP!"

Another officer walked over and whispered, "We've lost contact with Spartan-117. He was on a heading toward the artifact, but radiation spikes have jammed communications. Recommendations?"

Strauss furrowed his brow. He had done everything he could to help the Spartan, much to the dismay of certain brass in HighCom. Resources had already been thin, and any resources he had already spent on the super soldier had been heavily frowned upon.

"There's not much more we can do. Unless he re-establishes contact, he's on his own."

"But, sir â€œ"

"I said _nothing_, do you read me? Now get back to your post."

Strauss put the Spartan out of his mind. There was nothing he could do for the man now. There was nothing anyone could do for him now.

Godspeed.

* * *

>John paused at a lone acacia tree in the wilderness. Nearly twelve kilometers had been traversed in a single sprint, a feat nearly impossible for a mere mortal. Even demi-gods and demons needed their rest, however, and Spartan-117 took a moment in the shadow of the tree to quench himself with a water ration and a stim pack. Along the way, waves of Phantoms and Banshees had passed overhead. He had braced for an attack when the first wave streaked overhead, but it eventually became clear to him they were not interested in a lone target, even if it were the 'demon' himself.<p><p>

Still, John held his weapon in hand. He could assume only so much about enemy craft passing nearby, and he wanted to take little chances.

John moved forward from the shadow of the tree, through the hollow carcass of a Hornet long-ago destroyed. He could not help but feel a sense of peace, as though he had done everything he could to save humanity. That feeling was coupled with a sense of failure, as the ambient radiation he was monitoring spiked and held its power. He had noticed the percussive spikes in ambient radiation as he grew closer to the artifact, but the high level was now constant.

Aircraft continued to pass overhead, ignoring what was humanity's best hope for survival. They maintained their course towards the looming structure in the distance. John had finally reached the crater, but the artifact was still several kilometers in. The Master Chief approached the edge of a cliff as the structure began to move.

He was too late.

Fourteen fins rose from the ground, protruding into the air like arms raised to the heavens. A bright light shone in the center of the formation, illuminating the area. Hundreds of Covenant aircraft and spaceships circled the position in confused patterns.

Suddenly, the light flashed. John braced himself as the ground rumbled and the air cried out with thunder. The Covenant ships were apparently not prepared for this turn of events, and they began to turn and speed away from the scene. The bright light became a beam that shot out from the center of the structure. The skies boiled and the moon turned blood red behind the shroud of dark clouds as a radiation shockwave exploded outward from the structure. The panorama became exponentially brighter as the shockwave quickly bore down on each ship, and soon the Master Chief was enveloped.

Light turned to dark as the Spartan collapsed and blacked out.

16. Chapter Sixteen

****Chapter Sixteen****

****TIME: DATE RECORD ERROR ANOMALY **
> ****Time Unknown, ****Date unknown **
> In slipspace \****aboard Forerunner ship _Titan_****

_From the depths of dark solitude,
> from_The Eternal abode in my Holiness,___
> Hidden, set apart, in my stern counsels,
 __Reserv'd for the
days of futurity,
> _I have sought for a joy without pain,
> _For a solid without fluctuation.__
> Why will you die, O Eternals?_
> Why live in unquenchable burnings?

* * *

><p><p>

_Ah, yes, this woman. You call her 'Cassandra'. My, how times have
changed._

What? How do you know Cassandra? Where are you?

_Where do you think? I wander this vastly misunderstood cosmic
machine that you call your brain._

Cosmic machine? What the hell are you talking about? Where am I? What
the--?!

_In time you will know every__thing. I had to escape you know__.
Those fools on my ship, they thought they knew what they were doing.
I strung them along, like everyone else. No on__e knows. Not you, not
that girl â€"__ not even your friends!_

Well, why don't you tell me?

_I __suppose I could offer something, y__es. Well, you are asleep.
Don't you remember? I had to escape. I knew you were coming. I came
into your consciousness once the machine was activated. I would have
wandered aimlessly for a while, otherwise. I suppose I should thank
you.__ Ha!_

So this is all a dream. Guess I crash landed one too many timesâ€|. I
always hated flying.

_Yes, indeed, this is a dreamâ€|but I am very much real. Please do
not mistake me for aâ€|__voice in your head___. I have catalogued
that notion._

_I see you are perplexed. In due time my new friend. Your
__consciousness stirs, and I cannot__ be caught here. Until very
soon__â€|_

* * *

>John woke up with a start. He surveyed his surroundings â€" back in
the 'lab'. <p>"Boogie man haunting you?"<p>

"Something like that," John smirked, nervously. "What's going on?"

"Halsey was able to perform successful surgery on you. Your systems have stabilized," answered Cortana.

"How long was I out?"

"Well," Cortana replied, "That's a tricky question."

John furrowed his brow.

"You remember the time anomalies that Forerunner crystal created? You know, back before you left me on an alien city with that monstrosity and no way out? Anyway, long story short, we found the crystal's sister, so time isn't exactlyâ€|easy to calculate. But by my estimate, you were out for 47 hours."

The Spartan had never been more confused in his life. He was also increasingly irritated at Cortana's attitude, particularly at her disdain for being 'abandoned' when she had plainly told him she had to stay on High Charity.

"Great. What's our status?" he asked, noting to ask Dr. Halsey about everything.

"We're en route to some where and some time. Not quite sure, but I'll tell you as soon as I find out."

John was relieved. Despite his unfamiliar surroundings, and Cortana's cryptic sarcasm, he knew where he was and what had recently happened â€" a far cry from the last two times he had awoken.

Cortana continued, "As usual, you defy the odds â€" or is it the gods? Anyway, your body is recovering much faster than Dr. Halsey anticipated. Typical. How's that old noggin' doing?"

John brushed the question aside. Even he was not sure, not after his naptime conversation.

"Good, I can move then. Let me out."

The bonds that held the warrior were loosed and he sat up, rubbing his wrists again. He surveyed the room and saw that it was not quite the same as the room he had been in before. He figured it had something to do with broken shackles and a compromised operation room. Still, the bright light shone from above, and he had been lying on another rigid bed of some sort. The now familiar seam ran up and down the wall, creating a door through which walked Dr. Halsey, right on cue.

"Ah, John, glad to see you awake," she smiled. "Cortana informed me you were coming to several minutes ago. How are you feeling?"

John said he was fine. He proceeded to bombard Dr. Halsey with questions as food was brought in. The Spartan barely touched it as Dr. Halsey summed up their situation to the best of her ability. The Dyson sphere, Cortana's escape, the Arbiter's loyalty were all a part of the doctor's fantastic story. John could scarcely believe it, had

he not gone through similarly impossible situations so many times.

"You need to rest some more, process this information while you sleep," she finished.

John began to object, but the doctor had already injected his IV with a healthy dose of diphenhydramine and the world began to blur once more.

* * *

>"He seems fine enough to me," said Dr. Halsey. <p>"Are you sure, doctor?" asked a worried Mizore.<p>

"Yes, we have been monitoring him around the clock, his mind is intact. His brainwaves are at normal function â€" for a Spartan â€" and we've made sure there have been no intrusions via his neural link. Cortana's wiped any residual data clean for good measure."

"Good," said Mizore, hesitantly. "I would hate for the Other to have infiltrated us, even if through your friend. Madness drives him. Chaos and destruction are left in his wake."

Dr. Halsey wrinkled her nose. If Mizore was right, they had to be extra careful. Whatever the 'Other' was, they had to be certain it was not on board. John did not need the extra sleep, but it would not hurt, and it would give Cortana one last opportunity to examine the Spartan.

"Cortana, how has this pass gone?" she asked.

"Fine," the AI answered, "I have absolutely no idea what to look for, though. I haven't found anything abnormal â€" at least abnormal for him."

"Just be thorough, please," responded Halsey.

The door opened once more and in strode the Arbiter.

"Doctor, how isâ€|John, Spartan-117?" he asked.

"He's well, he will be revived soon. His injuries have been patched up, and he's a quick healer."

"Excellent. I must commune with him once he is able. We have much to discuss, and I am quite curious about his abilities," the Arbiter stated. "Despite my deep loathing for the demon â€" or rather, soldier â€" I cannot deny the great warrior that he is."

"I'm not so sure he's gonna say much," sneered Cortana, "â€|not very big on words."

The room dispersed as John lay there recovering. Mizore stayed, however, keeping a watchful sensor on the Spartan. The ancient intelligence could not help but be frustrated in wonder.

"Where are you, Tycho?"

17. Chapter Seventeen

****Chapter Seventeen****

****TIME: DATE RECORD ERROR ANOMALY **
> ****Time Unknown, Date unknown \ ****In****slipspace******

****Titan****

"What's all this?"

John had made his way to a large room that resembled his recovery room, except it held several alien-looking cots, on which most of them lay humans. John noticed every patient seemed to be in bad shape for a variety of reasons. Not all were humans, though, a certainty that piqued John's interest. The problem was, however, nobody was answering him. Instead of repeating himself, though, he strolled to the nearest bed.

The Spartan recognized the fallen immediately: Sergeant Griffith. The man had expressed his dislike for John during their first meeting. Master Chief doubted that having saved Griffith's life had changed his disposition much, however. Still, John felt a pang of regret while looking at the injured man. He felt responsible.

"He'll pull through. Radiation should have killed him, though," said a subdued Cortana.

"What happened?"

"You don't remember?" Cortana asked incredulously. She emerged from a holographic emitter, while John stood silent for a moment before she continued, "Well, the artifact we have come to know as 'The Ark' went off, blasting waves of radiation for miles. Nothing survived. Well, almost nothing," she noted, nodding towards Griffith.

"We managed to rescue a few, though. Mostly Spartan-IIIs that had some radiation shielding," Cortana added. "Oh, and that blast was a signal, of sorts, that was magnified and propelled through slipspace by our Moon. Apparently it was artificial â€" the Forerunners built it to split that signal and send it to the Halo installations."

John remained quiet. "What for?" he asked after processing the ludicrous-sounding information.

"What do you think?" Cortana sneered.

Unbelievable.

At least that is how John felt. After everything he had seen and gone through, all hope was lost. He had failed. The Halos would fire and life would cease to exist throughout the galaxy. The Spartan could not help but think of ways to escape the Halo effects and ensure that humanity was not completely exterminated.

"Cortana, is there any way to â€" "

"Doctor, Sergeant Griffith is about to wake up. Shall I inform Johnson?" she interrupted.

Dr. Halsey's voice keyed over the COM, "I suppose. I'll be right in."

Catherine entered, not a scant minute later, with Johnson on her heels.

"How's he doing?" asked the Sergeant with an unusually concerned tone.

"He's alright," said Dr. Halsey. "He lost kidney functions several hours ago, but we luckily managed to flash-clone him a new pair just before they failed. We've grafted skin to replace the radiation burns throughout his body, but he'll need plenty of rest."

John admired the soldier's toughness. He had recovered from terrible injuries himself, but he attributed that to his augmentations. Griffith was one tough Marine.

The bedridden soldier stirred and awoke to a trio of spectators as Halsey finished her diagnosis.

"Who's kidneys do I have and why?" he croaked.

"You're lucky to be alive, soldier. Lucky for you, the best doctor in the galaxy was in town," joked Johnson. Griffith turned and looked at him quizzically.

"Dad?"

* * *

>"The Prophets betrayed us! They must pay!"<p><p>

The Sangheili warriors had gathered in continued frustration. Their battle over High Charity had ended in a stalemate, but both sides suffered heavy losses. The remaining Sangheili ships had limped to their homeworld, looking to gather forces and retaliate.

"Indeed, brother," proclaimed another. "The Prophets have betrayed us. But we must not forget our path. Should we repay with bloodshed? Or should we not be striving for the Great Journey?"

Murmuring broke out as the congregated warriors debated those words.

"Brothers!" exclaimed the Elite that stood at the head of the room. "The Prophets have indeed betrayed us, but they were fools aside. The Great Journey is a lie!"

The room exploded with anger and confusion. "Oracle Master, this is madness! How can we?"

"The oracle has spoken. The Prophets have spread lies for centuries. Our Covenant was founded on trickery and fear, and their treachery runs deeper than the Rift of Humec.

"They knew of the Parasite, yet they thrust us into their hunger. They plotted the Jiralhanae ascent to power. The deepest of their treacheries, though, was the deceit of the Great Journey. Our entire

race shall be wiped out by their lies and folly, _b__ut we must temper__ our vengeance_!" bellowed F'enr Gran, the sole surviving Oracle Master and ranking Sangheili.

"What do you propose?" asked an angry Elite in the crowd.

Once the murmuring died down, the Oracle Master continued, "I have communed with the Oracle, and our path has become clear to me. We have sought out the Heretics' renewed allegiance. They were enlightened while we were pawns. I am happy to welcome our brothers back into the fold.

"Our paths shall converge at the Labyrinth of Aeons, a place only revealed to us now. The Prophets knew not of this world. There we shall forge our destinies and destroy theirs!"

A cry of approval was raised and the Sangheili began chanting as F'enr strode out of the chamber.

"You are certain of this?" he asked.

The floating orb propelled itself to face the Sangheili. "Of course. I am programmed to stop the Flood. This is the only way," said a most pleased 343 Guilty Spark.

"Very well. I have convinced the others and arranged for the Heretics' return. We must depart at once, please follow me," said F'enr. His blood boiled at the thought of the Prophets' betrayal and their new guardians, the Jiralhanae. He was determined to change his world's fate at all costs.

* * *

>"Interesting," said Mizore, "The Resplendent Key is active. We must be nearing our destination." <p>"Yes, I can sense it too," responded Joyeuse, "Has it revealed our course?"<p>

"Unfortunate, but no. However, one can guess," replied Mizore. "The shield worlds are the most logical locations, though the Resplendent Key may believe that route lost after the destruction of the third installation."

"There is still the Labyrinth of Aeons."

"Yes, that has occurred to me. This very well may be our destination, however I do not sense how fruitful that path may be," lamented Mizore.

"Are your thoughts on 'The Other'?" asked Joyeuse.

"Indeed. Your sister has searched for him several times, to no avail. Have you?"

"No. Cortana is still wary of me, she forbids my intrusion," said Joyeuse.

"We must find him before it is too late. He wields great power with little responsibility. His madness will undo the universe. We must prevent him from joining a host at all costs," expressed Mizore.

"I understand the dire nature of the situation, Mizore. I shall redouble my efforts to find him," Joyeuse assured.

"Good. What of the others?"

"We are still mistrusted by our own masters," Joyeuse reported. "I contain much of the information that is required because I replicated Cortana's memory. There are, however, others who place their confidence with me. The 'Arbiter' has allowed me to question him and glean much information about his race and their broken alliance. We shall be able to use him and his followers to our purposes."

"Excellent. We must be prepared for our arrival. I shall inform Dr. Halsey of our possibilities. Please see to it that Cortana understands our situation."

18. Chapter Eighteen

****Chapter ****Eighteen****

****TIME: DATE RECORD ERROR ANOMALY ******

> Time Unknown, Date unknown \ In **slip space** ******

> aboard Forerunner ship _Titan**_**

John had little time to contemplate the situation. Once Johnson and Griffith were reunited, he headed out of the medical ward. The Spartan was not accustomed to wandering; following orders was engrained in his psyche, and even during rest periods he always moved with purpose. This, however, was different. He had nobody to answer to, and very little answers. He was deep in thought when he ran into an old friend.

"Finally!" cried Kelly. "We've been wondering when we'd have you ready for action again."

John smiled. "Good to see you too. Where's he?"

"I'm right here," said Fred, coolly rounding a corner. "About time you got out here to see us. We've been waiting for a while."

"Well, I'm here," said the happy Spartan. It felt like ages since he had last seen his squadmates. Much like his first departure to Alpha Halo, John had been unsure if his friends had survived. He was once again glad to be reunited with his fellow Spartans.

The trio walked through the ship, recounting their stories to each other, each one more fantastical than the other. John's encounters on Halo 05, Gravemind, the secrets of Onyx, the Dyson Sphere, and Cortana's miraculous rescue were all retold with fascination and curiosity. The outrageous had truly become the norm for those who now occupied the _Titan_. Sadness permeated John's mood as well, though, as the realization of his fallen teammates and comrades throughout the tales fell heavy on his heart.

"So there's another copy of Cortana floating around?" John finally asked.

"Well, mostly yes he" per se. She calls herself 'Joyeuse', says she's

Cortana's sister," replied Kelly.

John frowned. He began to wonder if this was the reason for Cortana's peculiar behavior. He had grown used to her human-like qualities, but she had turned into something much more volatile. That was a discussion best left for someone else.

"So how exactly did you guys get out of the â€" what was it? Dyson Sphere?" he continued.

"Well, that's a very long story," interjected Dr. Halsey, who had caught up to the group. "But I suppose it can be summed up. We found this ship, with a little help from Mizore, and it created a rift through slipspace that brought us back to this dimension. Quite fascinating, when you think about it â€"

"So you guys just had a picnic until you found this ship, eh?" John joked.

"Oh, no, there are plenty of stories to tell about our exploits in the sphere. But we've got no time right now; I'd like you all to meet me here in five minutes." Dr. Halsey handed them a datapad with coordinates overlayed onto the ship's map. "Mizore will guide you."

The Spartans looked at each other quizzically as Catherine briskly walked away.

"Guess we have some more surprises in store," said Fred.
"Mizore!"

The old man glowingly rose from the nearest holographic projector.

"Yes, Frederic?"

"Fred!" scowled the Spartan. "Can you get us here?" he asked, pointing to the navigation point on his datapad.

"Certainly. Please be still."

Light enveloped the three soldiers and they vanished. John felt the familiar, gut-wrenching sensation of teleportation, and moments later they were standing at their destination. Queasy, the Spartans noticed that lining the walls and dotting the room were various pieces of equipment, between which several Huragok, or Engineers as John had come to know them, were floating. Though a somewhat bizarre scene, the Spartans began to recognize these pieces.

"Our armor!" exclaimed Fred.

"Yes," said Dr. Halsey, as she hurriedly stepped through the door. "We've finally got the means to modify it. These aliens are very useful," she gasped, a bit out of breath. The Spartans looked at her with concern. "Oh, don't mind me, I just prefer walking to molecular dematerialization," she quipped.

"We've run into some technological advancements since I last saw you," she continued, interrupting John before he could begin to ask any questions. "However, we lackedâ€|technicians. Luckily, now, we

have these Engineers to help us!"

"Finally," chortled Kelly. She turned to John and added, "We've been waiting for these for a while."

"Kelly, Fred, please stand in these designated areas," Halsey asked curtly. "Cortana, please have the Huragok begin procedures."

A series of chirps, clicks, and beeps rang out from the communication system in the room, and the Engineers immediately broke into action. The tiniest bit of disappointment welled up in John; he was always first to volunteer for better equipment. He pushed the silly emotion aside, however — he was sure there was a good reason for this.

The doctor continued, "These are Mark VII suits with some nifty modifications. As you know, Mizore led us to uncover the technology that we've integrated with ours. On our brief stint on Earth, we were able to recover ONI's last great contribution to the Spartan program before—" She trailed off as the Engineers continued piecing together the armor onto Fred and Kelly. "Well, as you will see, the armor has been tested on Linda —"

John's stomach lurched — how could he have forgotten about Linda?! He turned as a slender-armored figure strode from a room beyond the mass of floating Engineers. The armor was not far from his MJOLNIR Mark VI armor, except it held a pale gold sheen and her visor was narrowed into a 'T' shape. The air around her rippled, though, as though she was encased in another dimension.

Impressive.

The Spartan raised two fingers and swiped them across her visor and John smiled. At least his mind's betrayal had not completely ruined the moment.

"— as you can see, it's fully functional," rambled Dr. Halsey. "We've tested it in the ship's artificial reality chamber, where you'll be testing all yours as well."

Linda marched down and sat on a seat opposite John and removed her helmet. The scars on her face caused his mind to wince as memories of Linda's death and resurrection, or so he thought of it, flooded back to him. She continued to smile, though, and the Master Chief could not be more thankful to have seen his best sniper once again. He had indeed been lucky to save her, but she had returned the favor not long after her recovery.

"Nice of you to join the party," she laughed. "You're gunna love this armor."

John began to answer, but Halsey cut him off, "Actually, his armor isn't going to be quite the same as yours."

"We found one particular piece of technology that stood out, mainly because it was whole. I was planning on having Fred don this equipment in your absence, but seeing as you're here—".

From the ceiling descended an encasement of sorts, a glass tube that neatly contained several pieces of constructed metal and synthetics.

Its dulled colors could not take the luster from the container, as each piece seemed to vibrate with life on its own. A pulse of excitement ran through John as the compartment revealed its contents to him as his mind raced:

_I suggest you upgrade to at least a Class Twelve combat skin. Your current model only scans as a Class Two, which is i__ll-__suited for this kind of work._

An insidious laugh went unnoticed in the Spartan's subconscious.

19. Chapter Nineteen

****Chapter ****Nineteen****

****Era of the****Great Betrayal, Act of Retribution**** ******
> En route to Resplendent Key

"We are approaching the system edge," reported the golden-clad Sangheili.

"Good," replied F'enr Gran "We shall remove ourselves from holy space shortly, I would like an immediate report on the system and what we may encounter."

"Yes, Oracle Master," replied the ship master as he scurried off to carry out his orders.

The Elite was deep in thought. He knew as little about the planetary system as the next Sangheili, and he was wary of the Oracle's description. He only knew this to be the only path laid out before him and his race.

The Prophets know nothing of vengeance.

"Please, proceed with caution," warned 343 Guilty Spark. "The area has been known to contain anomalies."

"I have no need for that advice," replied F'enr. "We have been as careful as necessary."

Gravity shifted as a blur of green dots appeared in the vacuum of space. The massive fleet had emerged from slipspace and were hastily powering up after their re-entry into normal space. The system was dark, as though all light were extinguished around the mass of ships.

"Why is there such darkness, Oracle?"

"Oh, my. It seems as though the fission light radiator at the core of this system has malfunctioned."

"You refer to the sun â€œ"

"Yes, as you may think of it. This entire system was created, including its source of power and light."

F'enr was not happy to hear this news. They would need to tread

softly, lest the last remnants of his race be obliterated.

"Very well. Lead us to the Key."

* * *

>The explosion slightly startled the Spartan. A Brute howled as its target was not felled. On the contrary, its mark was barely fazed. John stood for a split second in amazement â€" the shot had scored a direct hit on his back, yet he had barely felt its effects. He turned to face his attacker, which had bore down on the Spartan, blade raised. It lowered a blow as John raised his arm in defense.
<p>Despite a direct hit, the Brute's attack damaged nothing. Again surprising to John, the blow did not hurt him. No, the beast's attack seemed to empower him â€" he pushed off and the beast toppled over. As it struggled to regain footing, its eyes rolled up as a bullet pierced its skull. The Brute fell over one more time, this time dissolving into thin air as it hit the ground.<p>

"Damn, why the hell did I come out for this?" bellowed a disgruntled Griffith. "These damn robots are taking all the kills!"

The corner of Linda's lip twitched â€" the equivalent of a beaming smile for the Spartan in the midst of combat. It was good to be back in the saddle. She did not, however, appreciate the 'robot' quip.

"Interesting," keyed Dr. Halsey over the armor's COM system, "The armor absorbs kinetic energyâ€"it seems to repurpose the energy somehow. Fascinatingâ€".

John could scarcely believe it himself. Was the artificial reality really trying, or did this armor really just do what he thought?

He had little time to wonder â€" a group of Jackal snipers had taken aim as two pairs of Hunters supported by Grunts flanked him. He cursed under his breath that he would allow himself to be cornered. The Hunters had forced him into a sniper alley, a perfect strategy.

The air sizzled with sniper fire as Jackals sent poorly aimed shots at the Master Chief, and the jungle floor shook with each stomp of the approaching Hunters. Plasma fire peppered his position as the Grunts approached, but they were dispatched easily. The Hunters were close, however, and he had to get out of this predicament. John began to run when it happened â€" a plasma beam hit him square in the face. John was knocked backward; eyes closed expecting to be blinded or worse. He blinked once and realized he was fine. He shook it off as the first pair of hunters emerged on his left.

Spartan-117's energy spiked as the Hunters raised their charged beam cannons and fired. John had no time to escape this salvo, yet his body moved with lightning speed as the fuel rod cannons cut a swath of destruction through the jungle. They tried to track the Spartan but he was a blur, even to himself.

John dashed around and picked up the dropped Brute shot, circumnavigating the area around the Hunters in mere moments as they struggled to find him. He came up behind the first and fired a pair of high-velocity grenades into its exposed back. The Hunter keeled

over in defeat as John slammed the weapon's blade into the second Hunter's back.

As quickly as John finished the job, he heard the familiar whine of Banshees approaching. He spun around to face the new threats when he heard a crash to his right — two Wraiths had blown through the trees with their auto-cannons blazing and plasma mortars ready to fire. John swore as he heard shrieks over his COM system and Banshee fuel rod mortars detonated nearby. The suit, however powerful it may be, could not possibly absorb or deflect a hail of direct mortar blasts. The Wraiths fired and time seemed to slow —

Not —gunna— make it—|—

Suddenly, time sped up as if to catch up to itself, and John found himself whole. He was, however, nowhere near his previous position. Rather, he was ten meters behind the Wraiths. Astonished, his killer instinct kicked in. He ran toward the massive machines and jumped on the first. He jammed his fist through the back panel and snuffed the life out of the driver. The Spartan clambered into the temporarily unmanned vehicle and took the controls, subduing the second threat with a barrage of mortar blasts.

John braced himself for more, but the jungle remained silent.

"Status?" he barked.

"All enemy contacts neutralized," reported Johnson. "Christ, Chief, you got some voodoo armor or something."

The jungle melted away and the testing group was left standing in a sterile-looking chamber. Their weapons having disappeared as well, they marched toward the sole opening leading into the next room.

"One stinking kill," muttered Griffith.

John smirked — he knew the sole reason for that solitary kill was Linda's generosity. The group filed into the facility's antechamber, where Dr. Halsey, Commander Keyes, and Johnson stood overlooking data and footage from their test. Kelly and Fred walked through another door accompanied by several ghostly Spartan-IIIs, having withstood a separate barrage of tests.

"You're right, I do love this," said Fred, tracing arcs with his plasma knife shortly before it vanished like the other weapons.

"—|I assure you, his life was not in danger," said Mizore.

"Reminds me of the whole Ackerson debacle when we tested the Mark V," commented Cortana.

"It was merely fleshing out the combat suit's capabilities. Not even I know its full potential, but I can assure you the artificial reality was within its limits," continued Mizore.

"Does the artificial reality take the wearer into consideration?" asked Halsey.

Mizore seemed to hesitate as he responded, "The Reclaimer that dons the suit is in no mortal danger, at least while in the chamber."

John contemplated the exchange as Dr. Halsey dismissed most of the group back to the armory. John, however, approached her with plenty of questions.

"This armor is astounding," she started. "Like I was saying before, it absorbs kinetic energy and repurposes it to your advantage," she continued, pointing at the scene from moments ago being replayed on her screen. The Brute shot's blade did not seem to make contact with John's arm, rather he seemingly defied the laws of physics by immediately shooting forward and slamming his fist into the Brute's face.

The video skipped ahead to his encounter with the Hunters. "This has been slowed to twenty-five percent real-time," commented Cortana, as John marveled at how quickly he dispatched the enemies. The video skipped back to John's retrieval of the Brute shot and slowed even further.

"Impressive," said Kelly, having stayed alongside the Master Chief. "Might even get close in a race."

John scarcely heard her â€" he was busy pondering what he had just seen on the screen. He had indeed intended to retrieve the Brute shot, but the manner in which he recovered it was what caught his attention. He was running full speed, but was a solid meter away from the weapon when it seemed to launch itself into the Master Chief's hand, allowing him to continue without breaking stride. He had been moving so fast that the manner in which he obtained the gun was an afterthought.

John turned to Dr. Halsey and she cut him off, "This armor a scientific marvel. Not even a wishlist of capabilities would have contained some of the abilities this thing has."

"How did I get out of this?" John asked, pointing at the viewscreen which was showing his ordeal with the Wraith tanks.

"I honestly don't know," replied Catherine. "Perhaps Mizore could shed some light on the subject?"

"Do you not know?" he asked John. The Spartan remained silent. "Yes, well, you were in a situation you thought inescapable thus the suit transported you to a more suitable location. Of course, the combat skin would have been able to withstand the vehicles' attacks."

"How?" the doctor continued.

"By utilizing a slipspace modulation field that the combat skin creates, of course. It is intended for extremely short-distance jumps, precisely how the Reclaimer utilized this feature."

"Amazing. Thought-driven slipspace transport â€" I thought the violent nature of slipspace travel would be far too dangerousâ€", " Dr. Halsey trailed off as she whisked out of the room.

John and Kelly were left staring at the screen in the room. They shrugged their shoulders as they began to make their way to the armory. John began to ask Kelly how their testing had gone when suddenly the ship shuddered and loud bangs were heard emanating from within.

"Everyone, get to the main deck, we've exited slipspace," barked Cortana. "We've got company."

End
file.